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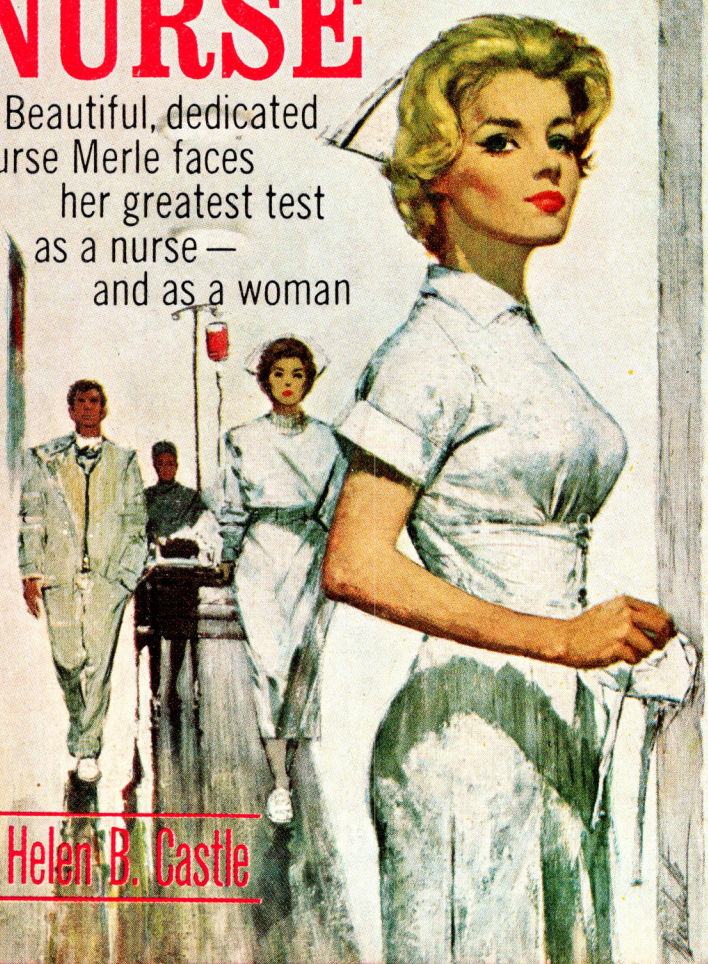
EMERGENCY WARD NURSE

Beautiful, dedicated Nurse Merle faces her greatest test as a nurse — and as a woman



Helen B. Castle

Would She Ever Be Free?

Merle returned Mike's kiss earnestly, intensely. She longed to accept this young, dark-eyed intern's offer of marriage. For she wanted to, had to forget her turbulent thoughts about Phil Crown.

Yet despite her deep feelings for him, Merle tore herself from Mike's embrace. There was a sob in her throat as she realized that it was no use—try as she could, it was impossible to forget Phil Crown. No matter what he had done to her, she knew she still loved him.

Would Merle ever have the strength to break the grip Phil Crown had on her heart and emotions? Would she ever be free of the memory of their affair—a memory that threatened to destroy her?

A hospital crisis and the baffling mystery that surrounds it helps Merle solve her romantic dilemma.

EMERGENCY WARD NURSE

Helen B. Castle

PAPERBACK LIBRARY, Inc.
New York

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PAPERBACK LIBRARY EDITION

First Printing: December, 1963

Printed in the United States of America

I

For Merle Asquith, R.N., the dark Saturday in February on Ward 100, Emergency Admitting at City General, ended at 5:30 P.M. This meant two hours overtime in charge of the ward's day shift and the third time in a week that a heavy influx of patients had forced her to stay over into the evening shift. The ambulances had rushed up to the unloading ramp in a steady stream all afternoon.

Putting away her cap and slipping a white cardigan sweater over her nylon uniform, she hurried along the side of the ambulance court through a door which opened automatically into City General's wide main corridor; she hurried to the time clock and reached for her card, marked M. Asquith, Staff Nurse. It was almost in the slot whose click would check her off duty when there was a cry from behind: "Merle, wait!"

It was Mrs. Agatha Jones, head nurse on Ward 100 for the evening shift. She was making frantic motions as she came on, white uniform skirt whipping about thin legs, eyes pleading through thick-lensed glasses. "We have a bad one," Mrs. Jones reported breathlessly. "The flash just came in—food poisoning, a party at some parish church hall near here on the east side, all of them young girls. Every ambulance we can alert is on its way, and they are also coming to us in taxis and private cars. Thirty or more of the girls affected—"

Merle Asquith closed her pale gray eyes for a moment. She brushed back a lock of taffy-colored hair from her forehead. She opened her eyes again, feeling ragged, frayed, all of her nerves tight and quivering, sagging under the heavy weight of responsibility which had been placed on her young shoulders because no one else was available to carry it. She said, "For heaven's sake, Jonesy, I have been on the run all day, haven't had time for even a cup of coffee since seven this morning! Doesn't the Nursing Office have any floats they can send you?"

"They've promised me two," Mrs. Jones said. "But you know Emergency Admitting; it takes time to learn just what to do with patients, and we're so full tonight. Please, Merle—?"

Mrs. Jones had been a head nurse for only a short time, and on Emergency duty for only about ten days. She was plainly in a state of nerves also, thinking of the sick girls who must be admitted to City General.

Merle sighed. She put her card back in the rack and began a return to Ward 100, long legs moving swiftly, the evening duty head nurse trotting beside her. They went through the other automatic door, onto the ambulance court and hurried together along the covered walk at the court's near side.

The court was rather quiet at the moment. A police ambulance was backed up to the low unloading ramp. A boy of about eighteen, head swathed in crimson-spotted bandages, was lying on a stretcher cart, guarded by a bored deputy from the jail ward on the fourteenth floor. The driver of a taxi was standing beside his cab, talking to a tall, dark-haired young man whose white jacket and stethoscope identified him as a staff doctor. He was Dr. Jablonski, an intern assigned to Emergency Service only today. Merle had heard someone mention he was hoping for a residency in neurosurgery.

It had been raining and the pavement was wet; now a fine drizzle was beginning, indicating more rain was on the way. And with a sudden rising and falling howl of a siren, an ambulance came streaking up the long driveway from High Street, on the east side of the vast bulk that was City General. It made a swift half-turn and backed to the ramp. The attendant hurried to open the rear doors.

A wailing began, from within. There were three young girls in the ambulance, ten or twelve years old for a guess, children who were in pain and frightened.

"Jonesy, you'll have to start clearing beds on the women's side," Merle said. "Put all of the patients there who can be moved on gurneys, run those into the main corridor and leave them to be picked up."

Then she pointed a finger at the taxi driver. "You! Get your cab out of here!"

He stared at her, someone so youthful in appearance that she might still be a student nurse. "Huh? Who're you to hand me orders? I'm waiting for a fare—"

Merle said, "This court is going to be jammed with ambulances and cars in a couple of minutes; you won't be able to move out. And I am an acting head nurse, telling you to get the cab away from here!"

"She kids you not; better get moving," the intern told the driver. The intern had a lean, bony face, a hard jaw and dark eyes which seemed to hold glints of lively humor. Merle spoke to him, with an undertone of anger in her voice which she could not hold back when talking to one of his kind, "We are receiving patients. Could we prevail upon you to handle them —Doctor?"

He frowned now, thick dark brows almost running together, then headed at a hurried pace toward the ambulance.

Merle followed him, pausing beside the deputy who was guarding the head-bandaged boy. "Is this patient ticketed for the jail ward?" she asked. "Move him on up there, then."

"Well," the deputy objected, "he can't walk, and I'm not supposed to move a patient myself."

"This one time you can!" Merle snapped. "An orderly can't be spared and the ramp must be cleared. Move him! Also, tell the driver of that police ambulance to get it away from here!"

It was strange, she thought. She had never given orders to anyone until several days ago, but she was able to do it—and people obeyed.

She hurried inside, through the wide, sliding ramp door which was never closed, to the nursing station—the large room of desks, chart tables and cabinets located between the men's and women's sides of the emergency ward. Mrs. Jones was calling orders to her influenza-thinned evening duty staff. The work of clearing beds on the women's side for the incoming patients was beginning.

Merle moved around behind the head nurse's desk. She picked up a phone, dialed the hospital's switchboard and, when she had an operator, began, "Listen to everything I say and remember it, because I won't have time to tell you more than once. Ring Central Supply and tell them to start moving every stomach pump they have to 100, right now. No—!" as the operator started to interrupt "—you do it; I told you that I'm short of time. Then get on the P.A. and call for every off-duty aide, orderly, intern and resident in the hospital who can work to report here. Plug in the nurses' and students' homes also and ask for volunteers. When you've done all of that, notify every women's ward from the second floor up to the eighth that female emergency patients are waiting in the main corridor, to send their orderlies and start moving them up, and that admission papers will follow when we have a breathing spell."

She hung up before the operator could do any more protesting.

There were three ambulances at the unloading dock now, more of the crying, frightened children, and a scene of growing confusion as parents and relatives began to appear. The rain was falling harder and the ambulance court night lights were not turned on.

The rolling carts were coming out of the women's side of 100, with the first two orderlies starting to push them and their patients into the scene of turmoil on the ramp and on toward the automatic door giving access to the main corridor. Merle called, "Not that way! Take them through the side door and across the corner of the terrace. Yes, I know they'll get a little

damp, but it can't be helped. Leave them by the elevators; they'll be moved on upstairs."

Then she saw Ellen Carey coming in through the throng on the ramp. Ellen was moving in her usual quiet manner, furling an umbrella, removing a rain cape, a tall, handsome woman of about forty with gray-streaked dark hair. She worked as an aide during the day shift.

Merle Asquith said, "Am I ever glad to see you!"

"I was lingering over a cup of coffee in the dining room when the P.A. calls began," Ellen Carey said. "What do you want me to do?"

"Go and work with that intern," Merle directed. "Also, soothe the parents and relatives, and keep them out on the ramp. I'll go and help Jonesy clear beds for those children."

An hour later the scene in the ambulance court was still one of confusion, the rain falling, slanting down through the harsh brilliance of floodlights. It was a seemingly hopeless tangle of vehicles, people moving about, the last of the food-poisoned children still coming in. But it was a controlled sort of confusion now. Merle had turned on the lights, at the ward switch just off the nursing station. She had managed to impose some order in what was taking place.

At six-forty by the big electric clock in the nursing station, Merle paused beside Ellen Carey. "What is the count so far?" she asked.

"Twenty-four," the aide told her. "Three more are being checked in now. That seems to be the lot—for us, at least; somebody told me several were taken to private hospitals."

The beds had been cleared and filled again, the stomach pumps had been set up and were at work. Merle had lent a hand at that herself, undressing the young girls and getting them into bed, soothing them, explaining what must be done and helping in starting treatment.

Volunteers had been slow in arriving, but then they had suddenly poured into the ward. Merle had accepted as many as could be used and had turned the others away with thanks. Now there was an ample number of skilled workers on hand.

The evening duty superintendent, still wan from the influenza which had forced her to bed for a time—as it had done in the case of the day head nurse on Ward 100 and so many of the hospital's other nurses as well—had appeared for a moment, seemingly satisfied with Merle's actions.

Walking out to the ramp, Merle checked the situation there. Doctor Jablonski was bending over a wailing child, speaking to her soothingly, "Easy now, honey. I know it hurts, but

everything is going to be all right. You'll feel fine again in no time."

He seemed to be handling himself well, Merle conceded. However, a studiously practiced bedside manner was common among interns; it did not necessarily indicate professional ability.

Then another siren was howling and an ambulance was crawling up the drive, with the attendant jumping out and coming ahead of it at a run. He reported, "We've got a bad one for you—two cars in a head-on collision, in the rain—"

"Oh, no!" Merle said.

But it was an incident of life on Ward 100. The victims of traffic accidents were constantly being delivered at its doors—not always at such an inauspicious moment, though. She sprang to action, enlisting several orderlies with a sweep of her arm. "Get the ramp cleared! Herd all of these people away—out into the rain if you must, but make them stand back!"

The ambulance was having trouble trying to make it to the ramp. It stalled in the tangle of cars. Merle stepped down and went to it in the rain. "We'll have to carry them," she told the attendant.

The ambulance driver came to help. They brought the first stretcher out, moving it to the ramp and placing it on a gurney there. Merle saw the waxen features of a young woman. Her face was bruised; she was partially conscious and trying to talk, in a frantic mumble.

"Her husband comes next," the attendant remarked. "She's worried about him, and for good reason; he's in pretty poor shape. Then there is the third one, an old guy who smashed into them—"

Merle looked around. The intern was still busying himself with the children. Merle snapped, "Doctor!"

Those last food poisoning cases could be shunted inside, where half a dozen doctors were at work. It was the intern's duty to handle these new arrivals; this was why he had been assigned to 100.

Dr. Jablonski gave her a frowning glance as he came in response to Merle's summons. He bent over the young woman for a quick preliminary examination, fingers deft and gentle as they probed her facial contusions. Then he checked under the blanket and said, "She's pregnant—about six months."

His palm touched the young woman's forehead. "We'll try to see that you don't lose your baby, ma'am."

Her husband was placed on one of the rolling carts next to her. The ambulance attendant muttered hurriedly to the intern, who nodded, checking again. "This one is in shock,"

Dr. Jablonski said. "O.R. for him—blood needed, maybe; we had better set up a fast cross-match and an order for two units. Also, we'll start him on plasma immediately."

Merle was looking toward the third stretcher, which was being brought from the ambulance. Dr. Jablonski said, a sudden brusque rap in his voice, "Well, nurse? Do we stand here and take our time—?"

Merle felt a hot stinging in her cheeks at his tone.

All at once Ellen Carey was there, with a tray; she seemed at times to have a strange sixth sense about what was needed, and to be ready to act. "If you'll handle it, Doctor," she murmured, offering him a stillette to draw a blood sample. "I'll see the lab is alerted, and hurry the sample to them."

"Thanks," the intern said, studying her for a moment in surprise.

Merle went in to the nursing station. She picked up the phone, dialed the emergency operating room, about eighty yards distant on the hospital's main floor, and notified the scrub nurse on duty there that a patient was on the way.

An orderly was wheeling the young woman in. Mrs. Jones appeared at the swinging doors of the women's ward. Merle called, "Screens around her bed, Jonesy. I'll see if O.B. can take her off our hands as soon as possible."

A woman who might miscarry did not belong among those sick children. Merle stopped an R.N. who was hurrying past. "Stop whatever you are doing and take a bottle of plasma out to Dr. Jablonski," she ordered.

She dialed an obstetrics ward on the tenth floor and made arrangements for it to accept the pregnant woman. Dr. Jablonski appeared from the ramp, stopping just inside of the Nursing Station room. "That third patient, the old man, had checked out; I marked him dead on arrival and sent him to the morgue," he informed Merle. "And I would like to move the young fellow to O.R. right now. He has several crushed ribs and indications of a ruptured spleen, along with possible lung and spine damage. I am hoping that red tape isn't going to keep him there on the ramp."

It seemed to Merle he might be implying she would impede, if she could, the completion of his errand of mercy—though he would have nothing to do with the operating room procedure; a night surgery resident would handle that. She replied, "Emergency O.R. is waiting for you. Any of the orderlies can find it."

There was a bite in her voice, the implication that Dr. Jablonski might not be able to find the operating room on his own.

"I know where it is," he informed her gently. "I'll move him along myself, to save time."

Then he suddenly grinned. "Hold the fort!" the intern said. "I'll be right back!"

Merle completed the call to O.B. She hung up, and then put hands to her face, squeezing hard in an effort to keep them from trembling.

She was very young and was being required to do too much, accept too much responsibility, making her wretchedly tired. All of her nerves were ragged and quivering again, almost out of control—and not alone because of what was happening at the hospital. There was another reason why she was under such cruel pressure, another reason why these moments were occurring more and more frequently, with a terrifying sense that she was rushing headlong toward a smash-up of her own which she could not avoid.

Telling herself to snap out of it, to forget charming, heedless Dr. Philip Crown, who had made a shambles of her life seven months ago, did no good at all. She could not forget him, and Merle Asquith was becoming desperately afraid that the memory of their affair, which he had ended to marry another woman, might destroy her.

She checked out finally, past eight, stamping her card and putting it in the rack. Then she stood for a moment in the wide main corridor, and Merle Asquith asked herself what she should do next.

The staff dining room was still open, but the thought of food was repellent. So was the thought of going to her room on the fourth floor of the nurses' home. Merle doubled back, cut through the men's side at Ward 100, and stepped out a door to a wide terrace on the east side of the hospital, a place of benches, trees and shrubbery that was used by visitors during the day—and by lovers at night, though not tonight. The rain had stopped, but the terrace was deserted.

Merle walked slowly, arms crossed and hands gripping her elbows. She was thinking of some minutes ago, when she had looked into a mirror, renewing her make-up, of the face that had peered back at her, an oval face, low cheekbones, nicely arranged features—or so she had always thought, until Dr. Philip Crown's rejection. Now she could hardly bear to look at it.

A whisper of footsteps began, behind her, somebody walking quickly on the gravel path, a man, from the sound. Merle stepped aside to let him pass.

Hands squeezed her arms from behind. Dr. Jablonski laughed. "They told me Emergency was rough, and they were

right; what an evening!" he exclaimed. "And I had to come and say it—you were great—!"

As though a live wire had shot jolting current into her body, Merle writhed frantically. She threw off his hands and pulled herself away, twisting around to face him.

"Don't you ever do that again!" Merle said, voice high and thin.

"What?" the intern said blankly. "Now, wait—!"

"Not ever!" Merle said. Tears stung her eyes. She was trembling again.

He stood for a long moment in silence, light from the forecourt of the hospital, half a block away, touching his face, with its hard planes, its suggestion of strength. His thick dark brows ran together again as he frowned.

"Listen, I didn't mean to offend you," Dr. Jablonski said at last. "Put it down that I'm impulsive—and feeling a little high, because my diagnosis on that young fellow, my first serious Emergency case, was right, with his chances fairly good; also, O.B. reports the chances are even better that his wife won't miscarry. I felt like sharing my feeling with you. So I got out of line and I apologize—though damned if I think that I got that much out of line!"

"All right," Merle said. "Just don't do it again!"

"Don't do what?" he said. "Don't touch you? Why? No rings on your fingers; it didn't seem I was trespassing on another guy's territory and even so I wasn't exactly making a pass. What is the reason? Do I make your flesh crawl? And is it my touch alone, or do you feel that way about everybody?"

With an effort, she managed to gain control of herself. "Aren't you working a thirty-six? Then you don't belong out here!"

"Even an intern rates a coffee break every now and then. I'm on mine," Dr. Jablonski said. "And look, I'm bucking for neurosurgery, not psychiatry, but I've done some reading on the subject and this 'don't touch me' business doesn't have a good sound . . ."

She bit her lip, hard, because she knew he was right.

He said, "I'd have been blind not to see and feel things all evening. I thought then it was pressure, and that you were tired. How old are you? Twenty-two . . . twenty-three—? Well, thereabouts, and it's pretty young to have a head nurse's duties unloaded on you because of the influenza epidemic and because nobody else is available to take over. But now, after this flare-up, and the way you seem to be holding yourself together with your finger-tips, I know something else is wrong—"

Merle said, "That is enough!"

A chill night breeze was blowing. She felt the angry hammering of a pulse in her throat.

"Interns!" Merle went on bitterly. "You're all alike, conceited know-it-alls, playing with people's lives—"

"You make me sound like a real jerk," Dr. Jablonski interrupted thoughtfully. "Somebody must have done something bad to you, to cause such a reaction. Was he an intern—?"

Yes. Philip had been an intern, at the time of their brief, intense love affair.

"Oh, leave me alone!" Merle cried.

She turned and hurried toward the forecourt, almost running, feeling she might begin to scream if he ventured to follow her. But he did not do this. A glance back from the forecourt corner showed him still standing there, a tall, lean figure, casting a long shadow, strength in his bearing. Merle could not help but think again with pain of Philip, who had not been strong—weak, rather, intent on finding the easiest way to gain all he wanted, and she had not discovered that until too disastrously late to do anything about it, to free herself from him before he dealt the terrible hurt of rejecting her.

II

Merle stood in the forecourt, with the vast bulk of the main building looming above her, sweeping up in a series of setbacks to the main operating room on the nineteenth floor. It was an enormous place, said to be the largest hospital in the world under one roof, and perhaps, with about twenty-four hundred beds, this was true. Running from north to south, it was two city blocks long and half as wide.

Nor was this all of City General. There were the new units, too. Orthopedics, dead ahead, rose from among the old frame buildings, some still standing, where City General had begun eighty years ago; one of those old buildings was called Shangri-La, where interns were quartered. Presumably, Mike Jablonski had a room there.

Pediatrics and Contagious Diseases shared a new nine-story building around to Merle's left, fronting on East Side Boulevard. Psychiatry, across an entrance drive there, was even newer and even taller. And, southward, beyond an intervening stretch of lawn, were the Nurses' and Students' homes, also very new.

Five years of Merle's life had been spent here. She had trained in City General's school of nursing and had been capped at the top of her class. This was another of the reasons —added to the fact she had been on staff at Emergency Admitting now for nearly a year and was familiar with its demanding requirements—it had been decided to let her fill in as temporary day head nurse at Ward 100 until Mrs. Lois Boswell could recover from influenza and return to work.

Merle became aware of a headache, of a queasiness in her stomach, and realized that, whether she felt like it or not, she must eat something.

She went up stone steps, across a wide foyer and into the main building again at the entrance lobby, a vast, vaulted, echoing place where only one bored clerk was on duty at this hour, sitting on the far side of the lobby at a desk. Merle crossed the big room and was in the main corridor again, with its colored lines stretching out before her on the floor, red, blue, green, white and yellow; pick a line and it would take you to where you wanted to go, theoretically, though people still managed to become lost.

Merle headed southward. She passed the social service

offices, where the evening clerks were at work; she passed the doctors' dining room, the student nurses' dining room and was approaching the staff dining room when something happened.

She became aware of a man who was standing at the head of a stairway which led down to the deep basements under the hospital. His attitude was strangely tense, almost furtive; he wore a shabby gray suit, and was looking away from Merle. But, as she came along, he glanced around to her. Their eyes met.

Merle said, in surprise, "Why, Mr.—" she hesitated, groping for his name "—Lockyer! What are you doing here?"

He started, a man who was fairly young, no more than about thirty, thin, with tightly drawn features which seemed to mirror pain—and also, perhaps, a bitter sort of anger. Then he turned and was gone, hurrying down the stairs, almost running.

It seemed quite puzzling for a moment. Merle went to the stairway and looked down, wondering what the incident might mean.

Three weeks ago he had been a patient at 100, brought in after having been struck by a car on High Street, almost at the ambulance entrance. The car's driver had claimed that the man had walked right in front of his vehicle as though not knowing what he was doing.

The intern on duty who had examined him—not Dr. Jablonski, then—had said, "Could be that the driver is right. Contusions and abrasions, no fractures, but there is something wrong with—" he had glanced at the admission card "—this Bruce Lockyer, and it is that he hasn't eaten much lately. He might have been too light-headed to know what he was doing. I'm noting malnutrition. Maybe he can receipt for a few square meals before he is shoved out into the world again."

Bruce Lockyer had been at Ward 100 for part of a day and a night, about an average stay there for any patient, and then he had been sent to an upper floor for further recovery. He could not have been in the hospital more than a week at most, Merle thought. It was very surprising to see him again, as surprising as the fact that she remembered him out of the hundreds of patients who passed through Emergency Admitting.

Several things about him had stuck in her mind, though—his face, with that expression of pain and anger, and his grimly silent refusal to give any information about himself. A worn wallet, containing only a New York driver's license, had identified him. There had also been the fact of malnutrition.

What in the world could have happened, Merle had wondered, to bring him to the edge of starvation in this city where

a hundred different agencies, both public and private, were devoted to seeing to it that no one went hungry?

Now he had appeared again, though there might be no particular significance in this—except that he had run from her. Merle went on thoughtfully to the staff dining room, picked out her card from the rack beside the door, handed it to a woman checker—the cost of the meal would be deducted from Merle's pay-check—and started moving along the cafeteria line, indifferently making a selection of green salad, swiss steak, peas, rice pudding and coffee.

She was still thinking about Bruce Lockyer. Then the man was abruptly jolted out of her mind as the tray was whisked from her grasp.

"You're just in time to join us!" Dr. Jablonski exclaimed. He turned away, carrying her tray to a table.

Quite a few others were also having late suppers. To protest, to tell him she preferred to eat alone or at least with anyone but him, would mean a scene, Merle realized. Her only alternative seemed to be to walk out, leaving him with the tray in his hands. But Merle did not walk out. She discovered in surprise that the 'us' to whom the intern had referred included Ellen Carey, who was sitting at the table where he now stopped.

Merle accepted the chair Dr. Jablonski was pulling out for her. "Ellen, I thought you had gone home," she commented.

"I felt the need of another cup of coffee," Ellen murmured.

Perhaps, Merle thought, she was lonely and reluctant to leave. There were no quarters available for aides at the hospital. Ellen had a room somewhere nearby and while Merle did not know very much about her, she had learned Ellen Carey was not married and lived alone.

"I happened to see her sitting here," Dr. Jablonski announced. "Now you come along: this is my lucky night!"

Merle said, "You doctors have your own dining room. Why do you have to use ours?"

"The company is so much better in this one!" he laughed.

His gaze was fixed on her. She could not help but study him for a moment in return—lean face, dark eyes, short black hair that was like a closely-fitting cap, rather large mouth and hard chin. It was a forceful sort of face, saved from harshness by laughter lines about his eyes and lips.

Merle began to eat. The intern began to talk to Ellen, apparently continuing a conversation in technical jargon about the problems of cross-matching blood. She replied in monosyllables. Ellen, for some reason, seemed to be ill at ease.

The banks of fluorescent lights in the dining room emphasized the gray streaks in Ellen Carey's dark hair and the some-

what raddled aspect of her features. She was a woman who had probably been quite pretty at one time, Merle thought, now rather thinner than she should be and seeming not to care particularly about her appearance.

Before long Ellen pushed back her chair. "I really must go," she said.

"Oh, please—!" Merle began. She did not want to be alone with this man.

Dr. Jablonski stood up. "I want to say it again, you two were great tonight," he announced. "It was a pleasure to work with you!"

Ellen did not reply. She nodded to Merle and left, almost hurrying as she crossed the room.

The intern remained standing, watching her until she was out of sight. Then he sat down again, and there was a surprising change in his demeanor. Appropriating a slice of bread from Merle, he tore it apart and began to make dough pills with quick movements of his long, lean fingers, while frowning heavily. Several moments passed; he said, "What do you know about Ellen Carey?"

Merle stared at him. "What do I know about—? Listen, I've had all I can take from you for one night—!"

Dr. Jablonski interrupted her impatiently. "I'm not poking or prying at random, merely to be a busybody. There are some things I must say, even if you think I'm an intolerable nuisance—"

"As it happens, I certainly am beginning to think that!" Merle informed him.

"Okay. I'll try to see to it that you think differently of me before long. Now, I have two good reasons for asking you about Ellen Carey. First, she is a very unusual aide; I never encountered one before with the knowledge she has of cross-matching, of drawing and processing blood samples. Also, she let slip a remark about Rhesus grouping that sounded pretty expert—"

"Ellen has obviously had a good deal of hospital experience. Anyone can acquire knowledge by watching what goes on."

"While remaining an aide, a low-pay job, especially when the woman involved also obviously has too much intelligence and skill for such a position? Why isn't she a lab technician? With only a little training, probably only a brushing up and sharpening of what she already knows, for a bet, she could qualify for such a job."

Merle hesitated. She was forced to acknowledge to herself that she had done some wondering of her own lately about Ellen Carey—but only in passing, and Merle also had to

acknowledge that she had been too intent on her own problems to wonder very much about Ellen.

"I'll give you my second reason," Dr. Jablonski continued. "I had an immediate strong hunch, when I first saw Ellen Carey, that we might have met before—or that I knew something about her, from the past. I grabbed at the chance to talk to her, here, with some casual questions about where she came from. Since my past is in the east, New York, where I went to med school, with ward work at Manhattan West hospital, I thought—well, that what I can't quite remember might have happened there. I couldn't get a thing out of her, though."

"It is so surprising that she didn't choose to respond to your charm and tell you all about herself," Merle said sardonically. "Now, you listen to me! Ellen is a wonderful aide, always on duty when she is supposed to be, careful, hard-working, never complaining about having to work over-time, and I—I don't think I could make out in charge of 100 without her help. You leave her alone!"

They had been talking with their voices pitched low. The intern said now, voice pitched lower still, "Would it make you change your mind if you were to learn that she once had been a nurse?"

He was making dough pills with both hands, strong surgeon's hands, Merle thought, and she realized, watching the deft workings of his fingers, that he had taught himself to tie square surgical knots with each hand.

His question made her feel a little cold. Because—if Ellen Carey had once been a nurse, why wasn't she a nurse now?

Dr. Jablonski went on, "We take oaths. 'By Apollo the physician, and by Aesculapius, I swear—' That was the one I took, coming down from old Hippocrates, and I suppose you recited the Florence Nightingale pledge when you were capped. We feel a little amused, and poke fun at the words; then a time comes when they hit rather hard, reminding us of responsibilities we have promised to bear. I don't want to hurt Ellen. I like her. She helped me over some rough spots today. But if there is something wrong about her, some reason why she shouldn't be working with patients, I don't think I can forget and let it go."

"I'm sure you are only making a wild guess," Merle said. She liked Ellen also, very much, and she had no intention of listening to any more talk about her. Merle's chair scraped as she pushed it back. "I am going to my room," she announced.

Merle, like Ellen, was hurrying as she left; she wanted to get away from him. But the intern, striding fast, caught up with her in the corridor and took hold of her arm.

She tried to shake him off. He held on, a gripping of powerful fingers. "I'll see you to that plush apartment house where you nurses live," Dr. Jablonski said.

"You will not! Get back to where you belong, on 100!"

"Things are quiet there tonight, thank heaven. Jonesy will make with a hurry-up call on the bullhorn if I'm needed."

The corridor was rather crowded now, evening visitors pouring in and out, and again Merle feared a scene if she tried to break away.

"Oh, you—!" she said furiously, with a strange feeling of helplessness.

"I have a first name; it's Mike," he informed her.

"Not to me it isn't. As far as I'm concerned, your name is Mud!"

He ignored her angry thrust. "Actually, Mike is only a nickname. I'll let you in on a dark secret; I'm really Melchior Jablonski."

This was said with a grin. And he went on, "I spent my growing-up years in more fights than I can remember because of that. Now I'm rather glad my mother fastened it on me. Doctor Melchior Jablonski—people should find it easy to remember my name. Of course, I mean to be good enough so they darned well can't forget it."

Melchior . . . Merle had to smile, in spite of herself.

He said, "I'd rather have you call me Mike."

"Mud!" she said perversely. They had come to an intersecting corridor where she must turn. "Will you please let me go now?"

"Nope," he responded, turning with her. "I like this too much. You are so pretty; everything about you is exciting—"

"Stop it!" Merle said.

She knew how some nurses would handle this sort of thing. They would laugh at him, treat it all lightly, give back as good as they got, flirt with the man and enjoy the situation.

Why couldn't she handle it that way? Why had the whole business of relationship with men become so perplexing, nerve-wrenching and almost unendurable as far as she was concerned?

They came to big double doors. Mike Jablonski pushed one open and they stepped out into the cool rain-washed night and the darkness, with the vast glitter of the city spread far before them.

They crossed a wide cement walk and started down steps which descended a steep grassy slope. The steps were wet and slick. Perhaps, Merle thought, it was not such a bad idea to have an escort, a steadying hand on her arm, after all. The student nurses' quarters were off to their right, seven stories

of glass and aluminum. The R.N. quarters, to the left, occupied a building only slightly smaller. Mike remarked, "You women live well. You ought to see my splintery cubbyhole at Shangri-La."

"The way I feel about interns, all of you ought to be made to live in trees," Merle said crossly.

"I might agree with you, only a few weeks from now. My period of servitude will end then."

So he had had a spring appointment, and his intern's year would soon be over. Mike went on, "I had a stint of riding ambulances last April, but otherwise managed to avoid Emergency service; the hospital's big wheels caught up with me, though, and I'm stuck on Ward 100 for a while."

Merle did not recall having seen him on ambulance duty. Last April, though, she had been ecstatically in love with Phil Crown and not much aware of anything else. It was a further reason to resent Mike Jablonski, that he was making her remember that ill-starred affair.

They reached the bottom of the steps. A long, expensive-looking car came around a circular drive in front of the nurses' home and stopped. Merle noticed it had a square, chrome-plated radiator grille. A light flashed out a moment as a very pretty young woman with fluffy pale hair got out. She said something to the driver, a man whose features Merle could not quite make out, and hurried toward the home. The car moved on around the circle and out at East Side Boulevard.

Mike Jablonski whistled softly in tribute to the woman's beauty. Merle stiffened. So he was like all men, she told herself, full of glib talk but constantly alert for someone more interesting and exciting. "That is my next door neighbor, Doro Speare," Merle said. "Why don't you let me introduce you to her? I am sure you two would have a great deal more in common than we have."

Doro—Dorothy—Speare could make short work of this male, if she were so inclined; she could tease and tantalize him and drive him half out of his mind, and Merle hoped she would.

"Oh, I know Doro," Mike responded. "But, though I admire her greatly, no spark ever leaped between the two of us."

Merle stopped. She did not intend to go any further with him. Nor was any spark going to leap between herself and Mike Jablonski.

Mike stopped also. "It is odd about Doro," he went on thoughtfully. "She could be the best scrub nurse in the hospital—but she works relief on other services."

An instant later Merle discovered they were face to face, that Mike was gripping both of her arms. "See, it wasn't so

hard at all," he said, smiling. "For me to touch you hasn't been bad—"

Merle almost spoke in wondering agreement with him. She, who had thought she could not bear to have a man touch her again, had not reacted this time to the squeezing of his hands, perhaps because she had been so intent on being angry with him.

"I thought for a moment, outside of the dining room, that you might slug me, but I wouldn't have let you go even if that had happened," Mike told her. "So the first step is past. And now for the second—"

His arms went about her. His head bent. He was so tall, she thought distractedly. When she had worn high heels Phil Crown had been a little shorter, and it had upset him.

She seemed powerless to move, to attempt to evade Mike Jablonski's kiss. His lips touched hers, faintly questioning, it seemed, for an instant. Then they were firmly possessive.

Merle felt something stir dimly within herself, a sense of warmth and longing. But she would not respond, she thought in sudden anger; she would not—

He released her, stepping back. "Good-night, Merle."

And he was gone, at a long, quick stride, leaving her standing alone in darkness.

III

Merle stood for several moments, feeling a churning complex of emotions, warm with indignation—at herself, for having inexplicably submitted to that caress, at Mike Jablonski, for having committed such an effrontery—and also feeling a little weak in her knees.

Then she went to the nurses' home and into the lobby, with its comfortable divan and chairs. Music murmured softly from a hi-fi set. A few nurses, with their dates, were on hand. Merle averted her eyes as she hurried on to the elevator. She had met Phil Crown a number of times in this lobby, and remembering was painful.

She punched the elevator button for the fourth floor.

Anger at Mike Jablonski still simmered in her as she unlocked the door of her room and stepped inside.

It was a very nice room, containing a dressing table and wall mirror, an arm-chair and straight-backed chair, a divan-bed near the windows and a large closet, with sliding doors, which held spacious built-in drawers. There were shelves above the desk for books and nursing journals. The furniture was Swedish modern, the walls and ceilings were mist green and the wall-to-wall carpeting was pale beige.

Merle was not required to live here, but the cost was much more reasonable than if she lived elsewhere.

Tomorrow, she told herself as she began at once to undress, she would make it unmistakably plain to Mike Jablonski that there was to be no more of this night's nonsense. And if he tried to ignore her warning—but he wouldn't. No doctor so close to the end of his internship would dare to risk trouble of any kind.

Her uniform, graduate's pin and name plate removed, went into a laundry hamper. Her slip followed it. She sat down and began to peel off her white stockings. There was a sudden knock on a door across the room, the door opened, and Doro Speare, in the bathroom she shared with Merle, said, "Hi!"

She was sketchily attired in a towel, with the sleekness of her notable figure emphasized. Doro was four or five years older than Merle, who said, "I had a glimpse of your new man—and of his car."

Doro's vividly blue eyes flickered slightly. She appeared to be somewhat disconcerted by Merle's disclosure. But then she

showed a rueful smile. "Oh, I gave him the brush-off tonight," the blonde nurse declared. "Big car, big talk—and big promises, none of which, I found out, he had any intention whatever of keeping. It seems to be the story of my life, getting stuck with such crumbs. I wish there was a lab test that would show up the fakers and chiselers—or are there any other kind, where men are concerned?"

Merle went to her closet for a robe. "Doro, you'll find Mr. Right one of these days," she said.

"That's what I keep telling myself," the other nurse sighed, patting at her pale hair. "It gets harder and harder to believe, though. I suppose I'm asking for too much. What I've been looking for is someone who will take my breath away . . . I had a glimpse of you, too. Quite a glimpse!"

Merle felt a sense of confused warmth at this revelation that Doro had seen Mike Jablonski kissing her.

Doro went on, "One of those apprentice surgeons in the head-opening set up on the nineteenth floor doesn't usually get downstairs among the common folks. Mike is a little conceited, thinking he has picked the world's most important specialty. Of course, he may be right. He is really very nice, as men go."

Merle said, "He doesn't mean a thing to me, Doro!"

"Well, whether it is serious or not, I'm glad," Doro said. "I—and all of your friends—have been worried about you, Merle. I'm happy to see you are beginning to snap out of it."

Merle bit her lip. Doro had known Phil Crown, had known a good deal about the affair. She had counseled Merle a number of times since to interest herself in other men, to begin dating again.

Merle almost said that one momentary, unavoidable interlude with Dr. Mike Jablonski did not indicate she was snapping out of it. But Doro, yawning, made any rejoinder unnecessary. "I'm for a little rest; I'm relieving on 8500 at eleven," Doro announced. "In charge, and how I wish some of those head nurses would get well and return to work! I don't like responsibility." Then she was gone, leaving the door to Merle's room open, closing the door to her room.

Merle went into the bathroom, laundered her underthings and stockings and hung them up. She came back, slid into a nightgown, cold-creamed her face and brushed her hair, then opened the bed divan.

The time was a little before ten o'clock. She had a small TV set and a compact record player; also, she had some letters to write, to her parents, living in retirement in Arizona, and to her older brother, who wanted to borrow money again,

but she eased herself between the sheets, too tired to do anything.

She was only tired, though, nothing more. Merle discovered in some surprise that she was no longer feeling the raggedness of nerves, the desperate sense that she was heading for a crack-up.

Her thoughts turned to Ellen Carey, with a resolution that the woman who had done so much for her was not to be bothered. This resolution involved Mike Jablonski and all he had said and done tonight. Was he responsible for the easing of her nervous tension—?

Merle denied this. She did not want to think about him. "Go to sleep!" she commanded aloud, turning determinedly on her side. Five-thirty, when her alarm clock would ring, always came too soon.

However, the thoughts persisted. She could not shake them off. Time was passing and it was beginning to seem that, as an aftermath to the incident on the steps, she wasn't going to get any sleep at all.

Somebody was tapping insistently at the hall door. Merle came foggily awake, then slid out of bed and went to open it.

The housekeeper was there, speaking quickly, "Miss Asquith, I was asked to awaken you. There was an emergency call; you are wanted on Ward 100, at once."

Merle peered wonderingly at her alarm clock. Its illuminated hands said the time was nearly four in the morning. "Did they say why?" she asked.

"No, only that I was to get you up and have you report as soon as possible."

Merle hurried to splash cold water on her face. She sorted through closet drawers for fresh underthings and took a clean uniform from its hanger. The housekeeper, in curlers and a bathrobe, studied her curiously for a moment before leaving. The phones in the nurses' home were cut off at one; there had been no way to inform Merle other than to come and awaken her.

What on earth, she wondered, could have happened at Emergency Admitting? She had a momentary surmise of Mike Jablonski having become involved in some sort of trouble, but she would not be summoned, if so. Jonesy had gone off duty at eleven, so she couldn't be in difficulty.

The home was very quiet at this hour. Merle rode the elevator down to the empty lobby and hurried out into chill, moisture-laden darkness, then on to the steps and up them. She felt a little breathless as she entered the main building.

It was quiet also, but with an uneasy, sighing sound which

seemed to seep down from above, a sound like a distant murmuring of surf that rustled through the building, coming from the ill and tormented in its many wards. The dining rooms were closed. In the social service offices the night clerks were busy with their never-ending paper work.

Going through the automatic door to the unloading ramp, Merle saw an ambulance and two police cars in the court. A number of men in uniforms were moving about, both hospital security guards and policemen. A big man in police blue, with stripes on his sleeve, came to Merle, obviously surprised by her youthfulness. "You are Miss Asquith? I am Sergeant Redding. Let's go inside."

The Nursing Station was deserted. In a treatment room alongside, adjoining the women's ward, Dr. Mike Jablonski, assisted by a night R.N., was working over a policeman who was stretched out on the examination table. Mike did not seem aware of Merle's arrival.

The patient's eyes were open, and dazed, showing some pain. A ragged gash ran up from his left cheekbone, across the temple to his hair-line. Mike, swabbing out the gash with tincture of zephrin, spoke to the R.N., "We'll give him an anti-tetanus shot, just in case—I don't think penicillin is either necessary or advisable—and after that a grain and half of seconal. Then we'll put him to bed for the night."

Cecelia Hanes, night head nurse on Ward 100, came in. The influenza epidemic had passed her by; she had been openly doubtful at first of Merle's ability to handle the ward on day duty, but now had full confidence in her. Merle said, "Cece, what is this all about?"

"I'll answer that," Sergeant Redding said. "We had an assault case, right here. Some fellow got into your control room—" he pointed toward the Nursing Station "—and started going through things at the desk. Mrs. Hanes caught him at it. She yelled, and one of your orderlies came running. The guy laid him out with a glass paperweight he grabbed from the desk."

Cecelia Hanes said, "He was the only orderly I had on duty tonight; I don't know what I'll do without him if a bad case comes in. And I almost recognized the man who hit him—!"

"Please. Let me finish," Sergeant Reddings said, and then went on talking to Merle, "A police ambulance was just pulling in. The driver here—" he gestured to the man on the table "—heard the commotion. He came running in also, and the intruder slugged him with the paperweight, too, then dropped it and cleared out through that side door onto the terrace. Now, Mrs. Hanes said she almost recognized the man, maybe

a former patient here. Then she suggested that you might be able to give us a positive make on him—"

"I seemed to have a vague recollection that you and I talked about him when he was here, Merle," Cecelia said. "But I couldn't remember any more than that."

Merle had a strange feeling that she could probably name the intruder without hearing any more. However, she listened as Cecelia began to describe him, a shabby gray suit, tight features, burning eyes, brown hair . . . Merle said, "Bruce Lockyer!"

Sergeant Redding studied her doubtfully. "This quick, you can give us a name?" he asked.

"I saw him, yesterday evening!" Merle said, and told of the encounter in the main corridor. "I remembered he had been a patient; somehow, he had stuck in my memory. And I wondered what he was doing in the hospital. But he ran from me."

"And he is doing some more running, but maybe not for long," Sergeant Redding said. "Now the question is, what was he after—?"

Merle said tightly, "Narcotics—?"

Cecelia Hanes had left the treatment room. Merle and Sergeant Redding followed her into the Nursing Station, where Cecelia was beginning to check the ward's back records. Sergeant Redding answered Merle, "Mrs. Hanes thought of that possibility. She checked the narcotics cabinet, but it apparently hadn't been touched. However, she made an immediate inventory of all drug supplies. Nothing was missing."

"Perhaps he was after money and valuables belonging to patients," Merle suggested, "though there isn't very much of them on hand at any time. Everything taken from a patient goes into an envelope which is sealed and placed in a locked drawer. A messenger picks up the envelopes at the end of each shift and takes them to the hospital's business office, where they are locked in a safe."

"Mrs. Hanes thought of that possibility also," Sergeant Redding said. "The locked drawer wasn't touched, either."

Cecelia Hanes said, "Here is his record!"

All of them looked at it. As Merle had recalled, Bruce Lockyer had been on the ward for part of a day and a night. Cecelia continued, "I am remembering more about him now. There was something that was—unusual, something in his eyes, that I saw again tonight, not pain exactly or rather a sort of pain that had nothing to do with his injuries. I tried to talk to him, during the one night when he was here, but he wouldn't respond."

"And both of you are pretty sure he was the man tonight?"

Redding asked. "If so, this record sheet shows a good description and we may be lucky enough to get some prints off that paperweight to double-check your identification. I'll put out a call to have a hunt started for him at once. Maybe he is just stupid, somebody who sized up this place while he was here and came sneaking back to grab anything he could lay his hands on quick. That kind is usually also stupid about keeping from being caught. We might have him in jail before morning."

Mike Jablonski and his assisting R.N. were moving the hurt policeman out of the treatment room and into the men's side. Merle left the Nursing Station desk, starting toward the ramp.

Cecelia Hanes went with her. They stopped, in the open, and Cecelia said, "This is all so very strange. Do you know what I think Bruce Lockyer was doing, Merle, when I discovered him at the desk? I'm not completely sure, since I was immediately upset to see anybody there who didn't belong, and then everything happened so fast, but I think he was going through the staff card file!"

She was referring to a small box which contained cards listing the names, addresses and telephone numbers of all those assigned to Ward 100 during the three shifts. But it seemed to make no sense whatever that Bruce Lockyer should have done such a thing.

It was also strange, Merle thought, that both she and the night head nurse had remembered him—and a matter of hard luck, probably, for Bruce Lockyer.

Sergeant Redding came out. Mike Jablonski was with him, saying, "We'll move your man up to the police ward after he has had a good sleep. Barring complications, he should be able to leave within two or three days. I have a feeling the orderly won't be as fortunate. He took a harder wallop."

"Thanks for all you have done, Doc," the Sergeant said. Then he called to Merle, "Thanks to you also, Miss Asquith."

Merle murmured, "Cece, I'll see you at six forty-five." And she hurried away on the ramp before Mike Jablonski might try to start talking to her. She did not feel much like attempting to cope with him at this dark hour.

Then, walking along the main corridor again, she found her steps slowing as she approached the stairway where she had seen Bruce Lockyer. She was thinking of their chance encounter and of what had happened since then. She came to the stairway and stopped.

Sergeant Redding was assuming the man had started running away from the hospital after the scene of violence at Ward 100's nursing station. But Merle was beginning to have an odd feeling, half-hunch, half-guess, that perhaps he hadn't done that.

She began slowly to walk down the stairs.

There were three levels below the hospital's main floor. Merle emerged into the first of these, stepping from the stairway into another wide, high corridor, this one with cement flooring, walls and ceiling. Overhead lights stretched off into the distance, spaced rather far apart, with dark pools of shadows between them.

Merle looked in both directions and saw no one. She heard a distant humming of machinery, probably part of the hospital's heating system.

Merle started walking southward along the corridor. She felt a little cold. The corridor was not heated and she crossed her arms, shivering. She had been down here only once before, during an orientation group tour of the whole hospital when she had started training, and Merle was well aware that she did not belong here now, past four o'clock in the morning.

What did she expect to accomplish? Merle did not know. A compulsion was pushing her along, the force of the notion nagging at her—which, if true, offered a startling explanation of Bruce Lockyer's presence in the hospital tonight.

She came to an opening in the wall on her left. It was not a doorway, since there was no door, but was apparently only an entry-way to a space on this level that was occupied by steel girders running from floor to ceiling and by an intricate, tangled maze of pipes and big metal tubes which ran in all directions.

There were no lights in that tangle. She could see only the nearest of the girders and pipes. Merle called, low-voiced, "Mr. Lockyer? I am Miss Asquith; remember me? I took care of you after your accident. And I am alone—"

She waited. There was no reply. She called again, with the same result. Merle told herself scoldingly it was rather ridiculous to suppose there might have been one.

But what she was thinking about had happened once before. It could be happening again.

She started to move on. Then a faint sound came from behind her, a shuffling of footsteps. Merle halted where she was, stiffening.

He said, "Yes, I remember you, Miss Asquith."

She slowly turned around.

Bruce Lockyer was standing just inside of the opening. Again she saw his burning eyes, with the pain in them, his tight, drawn features and his baggy gray suit.

He was alert and wary, ready to run again. But he seemed to relax a little after studying her for a moment, after looking both ways along the corridor and learning she was truly alone.

Merle said, "You are in trouble because of what you did tonight."

Bruce Lockyer rubbed his face. "I'm sorry about that," he muttered. "I didn't mean to hurt them. But they came at me, and I was on edge. I couldn't let them grab and hold me—"

"What were you doing on that ward?" Merle demanded.

He did not answer her question. For a moment she saw a different sort of expression in his eyes, a softening of his features as he studied her. "I neglected to thank you for your kindness when I was hurt," Lockyer said. "I am glad to have the opportunity to do so now."

"Look, I want to help you," Merle said.

"What made you think I would be down here?" he asked.

"Well, several years ago a man managed to live in these basements for quite a while, as a sort of hermit . . ."

And it had taken quite a while to apprehend him, she recalled, even after it was known he was hiding in these sub-levels.

Bruce Lockyer's lips twisted in a mirthless smile. "And I thought the idea was original with me!" he said.

"Why did you go to Emergency Admitting tonight?" Merle asked. "It is poor thanks for the care we gave you if you were only trying to steal—"

This apparently touched a raw nerve. "I had no intention of stealing anything!" he snapped.

"What was your reason, then?"

Again, he refused to answer.

Merle said, in the no-nonsense tone that every nurse quickly learned to use with recalcitrant patients, "You are going to come with me, right now. It will go easier with you if you give yourself up voluntarily—"

"And land in jail—prison, perhaps? No! I have something to do, first. After that, I'll surrender, voluntarily enough. They can have me, and welcome."

"I—I must report that you are down here. The police will catch you!"

She had to speak the last words hurriedly, for he was backing away from her, retreating into the maze of pipes and girders. Bruce Lockyer was shaking his head. "I have found a lot of hiding places—and I'll find more," the man told her. "They won't catch me!"

Then he disappeared, vanishing into blackness.

IV

Merle returned almost to Ward 100. However, when a glance through the automatic doors showed the ambulance court was empty, the police cars gone, she found a phone and called the hospital's security guard office to report a further glimpse of Bruce Lockyer.

She made no mention of having gone down to the first of the sub-levels to find him, knowing she would be hard put to explain just why she had done such a thing. The night officer in charge of the security guard thought immediately, as she had, of the one-time hermit. "Maybe we've got another one like that on our hands," he remarked resignedly. "Thanks for your information, Miss Asquith. We'll get busy at trying to run him down."

It was nearly five now and there did not seem to be much point in returning to her room. Merle went to a nurses' lounge on the main floor, empty at this house, and did some pacing as she waited for the night to end.

Going over again in her mind the encounter with Bruce Lockyer, she felt a little cold and shaky. Self-assurance that he was not psycho, that she had been in in no danger, did not ring quite true. Merle acknowledged to herself that she had not had much experience with psychos. The burning eyes, the tightness of strain in his features, could be signals of mental imbalance. There was no getting away from it, she had taken a considerable risk tonight, and this was something she must not repeat.

The dining rooms opened at six and Merle went to have her breakfast. Mike Jablonski did not appear, and thank heaven for that, Merle told herself. There was no sign of Ellen Carey, either, and the very fact of the aide's absence brought her momentarily to the forefront of Merle's thought again. She told herself firmly to forget Mike's remarks about Ellen.

Doro Speare, relieved early on 8500, came in, yawning and puffy-eyed. "I'm for the sack again," the blonde nurse remarked to Merle. "Shake me out of it around five; I have a date this evening."

Merle went along to Ward 100, hurrying in at six forty-five to put on her cap. Cece Hanes was waiting. They went through the routine of transferring responsibility, with the meticulous inventory first of the narcotics and sedations cabinet—a

rather large supply of drugs was stocked in it—and then Merle took Cece's report, the two of them checking ward count and charts together.

Nine new cases had come in during the night, and four of them had already been shunted to other wards or on out, including the orderly who had been assaulted by Bruce Lockyer. His condition was not as bad as Mike Jablonski had feared and he had been moved at six to a private hospital for further care. Those who worked for City General were not eligible for extended treatment here. This was reserved for the indigent, the penniless who could not pay.

Eight of the young girls who had been admitted were ticketed for admission to a children's ward this morning for further observation. Social service would determine those eligible for City General convalescence, if any, and the parents of the others would then have to arrange to move them elsewhere if further care was needed.

"It appears to have been simple food poisoning in all of the cases, and not botulism, thank heaven," Cece Hanes remarked. "As for the rest of the kids, they're earmarked for discharge to their folks, beginning at ten o'clock."

"Good," Merle said, making notes. "We'll need the beds. It looks as though this is going to be a rough day."

Cece agreed. The morning was raw and rainy, and Merle could predict a number of accident cases before noon.

Cece Hanes then indicated that she would like to linger and talk again about Bruce Lockyer but Merle was too busy. Her day people were reporting for duty, the breakfast carts were being wheeled in, baths must be given, rounds must be made and medications administered, with the ever-continuing pressure of admitting patients, of moving them along or out.

An ambulance siren was already whining in the court, bringing the first of the day's new admissions, with Mike Jablonski suddenly appearing at the unloading ramp, then coming to report to her, crisply factual: "White female American, seventy-five, double fracture of the right thigh, comminuted, contusions, abrasions and in shock: struck by car in cross-walk—"

Old ladies and cross-walks were the bane of Ward 100's existence, especially on rainy days. "Baylor!" Merle called to the R.N. assigned to her for day duty. "Female admission!"

An orderly was wheeling a gurney out to the dock, the R.N. hurried after him, and Ellen Carey, appearing and ready for work as the hands of the clock pointed exactly to seven, joined the group to help. Merle went herself to make a momentary check of the patient and to take the ambulance attendant's report.

Her job was a constant juggling act. Theoretically, as acting head nurse, she should stay at the desk, where there was more than enough administrative and paper work to keep her busy. In actual practice, however, and especially with a depleted staff due to the influenza epidemic, Merle found herself involved in much bedside and other ward work simply to get things done and to prevent log jams from developing.

The operation of an Emergency ward such as this one was still something of a novelty. The system was instituted as a means of saving both time and money through early intensive care here rather than shunting admissions along immediately to City General's treatment wards and to sort out at once those who could be moved to other hospitals after a short holding period. It was working well but at the cost of very hard work for those assigned to Ward 100, especially on the day shift.

The morning, beginning in high gear, continued to move at the same pace. The eight food-poisoning cases were sent to Pediatrics. The other young girls were discharged to home care, somewhat to their disappointment, for with pain and terror forgotten they were beginning to enjoy it here.

People poured in and out; doctors came and went, residents, staff men and M.D.'s who arrived with ambulances. Merle had to find time for the consultations each of them wanted with her. The phones rang constantly, and the ward clerk, Viv Daniels, a highly competent young colored woman, was very busy. The traffic cases Merle had anticipated began to arrive. Ward 100 had another intern today, one working Rotating Services who had drawn Emergency. Merle was glad to have him.

A day supervisor appeared briefly, to report Mrs. Boswell should be back on the job, recovered, within several more days.

Viv Daniels continued to be busy. This was the only shift which had a ward clerk. She answered a phone and covered the mouthpiece with her hand. "Explosion and fire in a paint warehouse," she reported. "We're getting at least four burn cases, maybe more."

"Baylor!" Merle called. "How are we fixed for beds on the men's side—?"

And after a while, with a lull, Merle drew a long breath, looked around and discovered it was noon.

She felt strained and tired. There were two ambulances at the ramp. One had brought in an elderly man, a probable mild CVA, who was being carefully helped to a wheel chair. The other, with grinning attendants and the Rotating Services intern at its doors, had rushed in a woman who had unwisely tried to do some marketing this morning; her baby had arrived on the way to City General.

Everything seemed to be under control. Merle said, "I think that I'll try to get some lunch."

But first, she decided, a quick trip to her room for a fresh uniform was in order. Emergency duty could use up uniforms at a prodigious rate. Merle, constantly changing, had five of them.

She was at the doors opening on the steps which led down the grassy slope at the west side of the main building when those doors were flung open and Mike Jablonski came striding in.

It was drizzling again and his hair, face and white jacket were damp. At sight of Merle he displayed a pleased grin and his hands reached out to close about her arms, squeezing them.

She writhed away in instant reaction, breaking his grip. Merle glanced hurriedly along the cross-corridor, but there was no one near who seemed to have noticed.

She was feeling again the furious protest that had been in her last night on the terrace—and so much for the lulling moments later when he had escorted her almost to the nurses' home. But doing something about his forwardness must wait for a moment or so. Merle said, "What are you doing away from your service?"

This could be serious. Mike Jablonski was working a thirty-six, a rather severe tour of duty, thirty-six hours on and twelve off. He had the afternoon yet to go before being relieved and in the meantime he did not belong away from Ward 100 except for meals or coffee breaks. Merle could not think of any reason why he should be on this far side of the building.

Mike gave her a mild reply, "One of the hospital maintenance men suffered a fall. I went to check on him, nothing serious enough to require admission. I left word with the clerk where I was going."

"Oh." It was a relief to find she would not be faced with the problem of whether she must report him. "Very well. Now about this—other matter. Will you please stop . . . bothering me?"

His thick black brows lifted. "Bothering you—?"

"Yes! You know what I mean!"

Her voice was rising. She could not seem to control it.

Until now she had been too busy this morning to think about herself, but now Merle was beginning to feel the too-familiar stirrings of all that had haunted her so much of late, and with a sense of near-hysteria she knew it was liable to continue until the merciless whispers would also begin that she could not go on, that she would crack up.

She was trembling. Several student nurses, in their plain

caps and blue-and-white striped bib aprons, came scurrying in out of the drizzle, giggling, and it seemed to Merle they looked at her in an odd manner. Was she plainly showing her inner turmoil?

This was too public a place to continue the discussion with Mike Jablonski. Merle said, "You come with me! We're going to get this settled, once and for all!"

She turned and hurried back along the corridor; she jerked open a door and rushed into a big room. It was a lecture room for the student nurses and for medical students from a state college a block or so away to the east, a small auditorium containing about a hundred chairs with arm-rests, arranged before a desk and a blackboard which held a rather detailed drawing of a human brain from the left side. At this hour it was empty.

Merle turned to Mike. He had stopped just inside the door, letting it close behind him. And she said, "Will you request a transfer from Emergency Admitting, or must I ask to be shifted to some other ward?"

She was still trembling. Mike did not respond for a moment. Then, "Any request from me would be refused. As for you transferring away—they wouldn't let you do it; you are too badly needed on 100. Anyway, that wouldn't solve anything, Merle. Not after last night."

She suddenly found it hard to breathe, and remembered Doro Speare's statement about having wanted someone who would take her breath away, though Merle assured herself she was not breathless now for that reason. She groped for a chair and sat down. When she could speak: "Of all the statements I have ever heard, that is the most ridiculous—!"

Mike nodded in agreement. "Somehow, such talk, about falling for someone, always does sound a little ridiculous," he said. "But I meant it, every word. I intend to go on meaning it—"

"Oh, stop!" Her fists were clenched, and she almost hammered the chair's arm-rest. "Interns and your slick, worn-out lines!" Merle went on bitterly. "How sick I am of you and your kind!"

He studied her broodingly. "You have worked up quite a hate against interns. But, Merle, we aren't all like Phil Crown . . ."

Mike walked away from her and began to pace back and forth between the desk and the blackboard. He went on, "All of us live like goldfish in a bowl here, with endless talk about everybody. I almost remembered about Phil Crown last night —I knew him slightly, by the way, since I was around during the last few months of his internship, and I rather liked the guy. I did remember about him this morning, about talk in

the interns' lounge early last summer concerning Phil and a pretty nurse in Emergency Admitting. I didn't pay much attention at the time, since I was pretty busy. A spring intern really has work unloaded on him. I didn't get in on the bets that the nurse, who was said to be taking it pretty seriously, wouldn't ever maneuver Phil Crown to an altar, since he had dropped hints that he meant to marry a woman with money and plenty of it, that he already had her picked out."

"Oh, no!" Merle whispered, flinching. Bets . . . the interns had bet against her becoming Phil Crown's wife. And the whole hospital must have known about the affair, she thought, must have looked on, perhaps snickering behind her back at her foolishness in thinking Phil Crown had meant his honeyed words to her.

Mike said, "I asked around and learned he now has a residency at the Robillet Foundation hospital. Somebody said his wife's father is on the board of directors there. I've heard that that hospital isn't much more than a fancy rest home, but a great place for a guy who wants to become a sympathetic hand-holder for wealthy females. Phil ought to make out fine when he goes into private practice."

Merle knew of the Robillet hospital, located somewhere on the city's exclusive west side. She said, "I didn't know he was there. I haven't seen or heard about him, since—" and then she caught herself.

She had told herself that she did not want to know. She had tried, very hard, to forget about Phil Crown.

Mike paced away from her. He turned and started back, and suddenly slapped the top of the desk hard. "Why did I have to meet you?" Mike demanded, almost shouting.

He was almost glaring at her, too. "Look, Merle, let me tell you how it is with me. These next few days are going to be the worst of my whole life. I want a residency in neurosurgery right here at City General, which has more operational brain cases every month than almost any other hospital in the world. But—well, you know the score, the number of residencies to be filled, with dozens of applications for each one, interns from everywhere trying to land a City General post, and only the very best with any chance of being picked—"

There was a look of deep longing in Mike's dark eyes. "I want to work with Dr. Voss and Dr. Bullitt, up on nineteen; they're the best in the field. I think they're favorably inclined toward me, but I might be wrong. To be stuck with Emergency Service now, at this final stage of my internship, to be shunted away from Operating—maybe it is a hint that I'm going to be passed over, turned down—"

He rubbed his face. "I try to tell myself not to take it so big, that there is plenty of room elsewhere if my application is rejected, other hospitals, other chances. But damn it, I want to work with the best, I want to be the best, and for me that means a City General neurosurgery residency, nothing less!"

Merle realized that, like herself, he was under great pressure. And no matter what had happened, no matter the way she felt about Mike Jablonski, she could not repress a surge of sympathy for him.

"Suppose I do get the residency?" he continued. "Well, you know also what the score will be then—five years more of study and hard work ahead of me, maybe six, before I can begin to practice at last. I'll continue on staff here. I'm making two hundred a month now, and after the deductions barely enough is left to keep me in cigarettes and clean shirts. I'll be up to five hundred a month by my fifth residency year, but I won't be exactly affluent even then—certainly in no position, since I'll be stepping out into the world to make my own way, to think of getting married within about three years more after that. And I would be out of my mind to think about it now."

Mike stopped and looked at the blackboard. "The noodnick who drew this brain has the frontal lobe proportions wrong," he commented. Then he shook himself and went on, facing her again, "So with all of that to worry about—me, one generation out of Poland, everything coming hard from the beginning and I'm expecting it to continue—do I need to fall for a hard-headed, cantankerous, beautiful young nurse with a phobia against interns? Like a head full of burr holes I need it!"

Merle discovered in astonishment that she was suddenly laughing.

She put her hand over her mouth, but the laughter still bubbled—not hysterically though, thank heaven.

Merle took her hand away. "Mike, I'm sorry. I'm not laughing at you—"

But she *had* been laughing at him, at the way he had looked with those last few words and the indignant manner in which he had spoken them. Then, as Mike studied her, beginning to grin, Merle realized he had deliberately forced that laughter. In spite of his agonizing worries about his own problems, he had taken the trouble to break the tension in her, to relieve the awful strain she had been feeling.

Mike went to the blackboard. He erased the brain's frontal lobe and re-drew it, with quick, incisive strokes. It was probably the way he handled a scalpel, Merle thought.

He said, over his shoulder, "I love you, Merle. I want you to be my wife."

"Mike, please—!"

He turned to her once more, with a gentle smile. "You don't need to say anything now. And don't be concerned about me—bothering you. Because I'm not going to hang around like a lovesick kid when we are on duty nor am I going to start demanding dates or other favors. I simply don't have the time for that, though when the residency business is settled you may find me quite demanding. Until then, however, I'll be fairly content to wait."

He let his voice trail off. Silence settled between them.

She could accept this, Merle thought. No decision was demanded of her now; he had told her she need not say anything more. But it came to her that something more must be said. Decency demanded this.

The moments just past had accomplished an unforeseen result. They had brought Merle Asquith, belatedly, face to face with herself, and were forcing an acknowledgment of something which she knew had been locked away in her heart, hidden and denied. They had brought her to a point when denial was at an end.

Merle moistened her lips. "Mike, listen to me—"

Then her voice broke off and her head tilted toward the corridor and the clatter of a P.A. loudspeaker there, to a message that was being repeated over and over.

Merle leaped up and ran into the corridor, Mike close behind her. The message became audible: "Miss Asquith and Dr. Jablonski, please! Miss Asquith and Dr. Jablonski—"

There was no need to call in. They were being summoned to Ward 100. The two of them hurried together, making the turn which took them past the dining rooms, with no time now for a change of uniform and lunch. Mike had a hand on Merle's arm, pulling her with him.

Nearing the ambulance court, they heard a siren. It was not the low whine which drivers used to announce a routine arrival, but a full-throated blast which warned of a red blanket case being delivered, of a patient who was close to death.

Mike said, as the automatic doors opened for them, "Back to the salt mine! And six mortal hours before I can check out!"

But he was grinning as he said it. Then Mike released her arm to run ahead and help to get the ambulance doors open.

This was the very breath of life for him, Merle thought—all of it. He found zest in even the brutal grind of Emergency Service.

He was not like Phil Crown, who candidly regarded medi-

cine as a means to an end, an open sesame to the social prominence which Phil craved, who had slid through his internship while doing as little work as possible, and who then had sought and gained an easy residency.

As Merle ran also, pausing by the stretcher, now on the ramp, taking a look at the patient, an unconscious young woman with livid bruises on her face, she wished the interlude with Mike had not happened, to bring her to the moment of truth involving Phil Crown.

But sooner or later, Merle thought, she would have been forced to face this truth. It was something Mike must be told at the first opportunity. She could not forget Phil Crown, would never forget him.

And there was even more. As Mike made his quick but thorough examination of the young woman, as Merle began to issue orders to the ward staff—another ambulance was backing to the ramp with more victims of the same bad traffic smash-up—she was forced to accept the fact she had until now denied. Desire for Phil Crown was still in her and it was something she could not eradicate.

No matter what Phil had done to her, she still loved the handsome, soft-voiced man who had so filled her whole existence during the few brief months of their affair. She was helpless to alter this.

Merle felt a sense of protest that the moment when she had laughed at Mike was gone, that the pressure and strain were in her again as she looked to a bleak vista of days unfolding before her, to be lived in deep loneliness without the man whom she wanted and could never have.

There was nothing she could do to alter this, either. And Mike must be told that his cause was hopeless.

V

Several days hurried past. The weather was fair now, bright and clear, but Merle noticed this only in a distracted fashion. Mrs. Boswell still had not returned to duty and Merle was very busy, constantly putting in overtime on the evening shift to help Jonesy, who was still having trouble trying to cope with her job.

Mike Jablonski was very busy also, working his hard schedule, and Merle's contacts with him for the most part were professional. He was keeping his word, not to display interest in her when on the ward. She did not see him in the staff dining room, and supposed he was eating with the interns. No opportunity seemed to offer itself to talk to him about Phil Crown, and Merle could not seem to bring herself to make such an opportunity.

There was one brief passage of words between them on the ramp, at a moment when he was going off duty. Mike murmured, low-voiced, "Have you given any more thought to what I said about Ellen Carey—?"

"Mike, stop being suspicious of her, please!" Merle begged.

"I wish I could," he sighed. "But I can't shake off a feeling there is something concerning her that isn't good, something I can't quite remember."

Merle changed the subject, "Have you heard anything about the residency appointments?"

Mouth going tight, he shook his head. The fear he would not be picked was very much with him.

Merle went to the hospital personnel office. As a temporary head nurse she could check the file of someone under her direction, and she went through Ellen's file, feeling queasy about doing this but also feeling it was necessary to end Mike's suspicions.

Ellen had listed employment as an aide in several hospitals, located not in the east but in small central California cities. Letters from those hospitals, answering inquiries from City General, said she had been industrious, capable, and they recommended her.

There was a set of fingerprints, which was required of all City General employees, and a police department form that stated the fingerprints had been checked against its records, with nothing to report.

It was all rather routine. Aides came and went in considerable numbers at City General. Almost any woman could obtain such a job if she had no criminal or subversive record. Ellen Carey certainly had no such record. Merle felt great relief upon discovering this.

Several other things happened. Doro was having dates with a new man, and was becoming quite found of him. "But why is it," she asked Merle, "that we can't seem to keep from thinking about some other guy even when we know he isn't any good for us?"

Why, indeed? Merle, reminded anew of Phil Crown, had no answer for her. "You mean the one I saw the other night—?" she asked Doro, who nodded in response. "That's over, though, finished," she announced determinedly, "and I'm going to forget him."

Sergeant Redding paid Merle a visit, to reveal that Bruce Lockyer had not been found. A search by the hospital security guard and the police through City General's cavernous basements had been fruitless.

"I don't know whether to buy the theory that he may be hiding out somewhere in this building," the Sergeant commented. "Miss Asquith, can you think of anything more that might help—?"

Merle shook her head. She still could not see that revealing she had gone down to the first sub-level looking for Bruce Lockyer would help in bringing him to justice for those two assaults.

"Well, he was after something that night and might still be after it," Sergeant Redding said. "If you should happen to see him again, I hope you'll yell, good and loud!"

But when Merle did see him again, she did not yell.

It occurred after her days off. The Nursing Office reported it had a relief head nurse for the ward, so she could take them. Driving her small car, seldom used since Phil had walked out of her life, Merle left the city. She spent a night in a motel and swam in its pool, she took her meals in good restaurants, all of this something she had once loved to do because of the sense of independence it gave her.

Now it gave her no pleasure at all. She had a vivid mental image of herself, young and alone, feeling her loneliness acutely and unable to do anything about it, for she came back with nothing accomplished. She had found no solution to her problem. Rather, she wanted Phil Crown even more desperately than before.

On her first morning back, Cece Hanes surprised her by asking for a double check on the contents of Ward 100's narcotics cabinet. "It's an official order, covering everyone,"

the night head nurse confided. "No reason was given, but whispers are making the rounds that shortages, and big ones, have showed up recently on several wards."

Merle said, "Cece, has anything been missing here?"

"No, thank heaven!" Cece Hanes assured her. "Doro Speare filled in for you, and you know Doro, things just don't go wrong when she is on a ward."

Cece was right. Doro had left everything at the Nursing Station in meticulous order for Merle, though she had to work overtime on her first day back. However, this was because of a high ward count and the need to help Jonesy.

Mike was not on duty. He had managed to get a day off.

Merle finished up at a little past dusk that first evening. It was now March. She walked onto the terrace again, after clocking out, for a breath of fresh air. She was sitting at a stone bench and thinking of going to dinner when somebody came toward her from the forecourt, moving slowly, hesitating, stopping, then coming on in a wary manner.

A quivering of nerves told Merle who he was even before he spoke. "Good evening, Miss Asquith," said Bruce Lockyer.

She could scream, as Sergeant Redding had advised, but there was a good deal of thick shrubbery on this side of the hospital. He could dart into that and it seemed unlikely he would be caught. As for possible danger to herself—but he sounded tired, not irrational, as he went on, "Those two men I struck—could you tell me—?"

"They are both all right," Merle replied.

"Thank God!" Lockyer muttered.

Merle said, "So the police didn't find you."

"They have come close several times," he sighed. "It is not as easy for me as it was in the beginning, when I was surprised at how well I could make out in this place."

"The beginning? How long have you been—hiding, in City General?"

He was standing on a gravel path, near the bench. "Since shortly after I was released, following my accident," Bruce Lockyer replied. "It was stupid of me to let that happen. I had been traveling for some time, eating only occasionally, and I was in rather bad shape. Fortunately, the problem of food has been solved for me, and other problems as well."

The sounds of Ward 100 reached Merle clearly on the evening air. If someone else would only come onto the terrace, she thought, they might be able to apprehend this man.

But no one appeared, and he went on, "Eating is easy, with so much food constantly being moved about. I have located a number of places where hot water is available for bathing and shaving—I managed to acquire a razor and soap—and to do

my laundry. Regrettably, I haven't been able to do anything about pressing my suit and shining my shoes."

And he had been living like a mole, hidden in the hospital's dark, deep recesses.

Lockyer said, "I'm at a dead end now, though, since I have to stay down below during the day and I just can't seem to accomplish anything at night. Several times I tried mingling with visitors, going to ward after ward, but there are so many women working in the hospital, and I couldn't find her—"

A chill night breeze plucked at Merle's skirt. She shivered.

He said, a sudden quivering ferocity in his voice, "Tell me where I can find Joyce Condon!"

Merle echoed him blankly, "Joyce—?"

"I know she is in this place, somewhere. I had a sure tip about that, and it figures; a hospital is exactly where she would be. I was coming to face her on the afternoon when I was hit by the car."

"I have never heard of anyone by that name," Merle told him. "And is she the reason why you were going through the card file—?"

"Yes," he muttered. "I know I was in that ward as a patient and didn't see her then. But the person who gave me the tip had seen her there—well, on that ramp where the ambulances do their unloading—"

"Perhaps she was a patient, or even a visitor," Merle said. "I can assure you there is no Joyce Condon working on Ward 100."

"She works in the hospital," Bruce Lockyer said stubbornly. "She was wearing a white uniform when she was seen. I'll find her!"

Then he was suddenly gone, fading away, disappearing into the shrubbery, for someone was now approaching. It was a security guard, beginning his night rounds. "Kind of cool to be out here, Miss," the guard remarked as he passed by.

"Yes," Merle agreed. She waited for several minutes, though, with the thought Bruce Lockyer might return.

But he did not. She went inside and called Personnel, to be informed there was no Joyce Condon working anywhere in the hospital, nor had there been any patient of that name during the past year.

Merle then put in a call for Sergeant Redding at the police building downtown, but was told he was not on duty.

On the following afternoon a truck arrived at the ramp and three men scrambled out. They identified themselves as railway workers at freight yards only several blocks away while they were bringing a woman, carried in a tarpaulin, from the

truck bed. One of the men said, "We found her passed out near the right of way—drunk, we thought, but there's no smell of liquor, no marks except a slight cut on her forehead. No identification, either. When we couldn't bring her to, we figured maybe we'd better hustle her right over here."

She was placed on a gurney, somebody who looked to be about thirty, grimy and poorly dressed, rather emaciated, with dry strands of hair like rope ravelings. Merle called, "Dr. Jablonski!"

The woman's eyes were open a little but not sentient. She was rather rigid. Blood showed at a thin laceration on her forehead. Ellen Carey sponged blood and grime away and Mike began his examination, glancing to the patient's eyes, then checking the cut. "This seems superficial, probably sustained when she fell down," he commented. And, gently probing with his fingertips, "I would say no fracture, but we'll x-ray presently to make sure. It doesn't seem she could have taken a hard enough blow, merely falling down, to knock her out. What did do it, then? What made her fall—?"

He looked at her arms. "No puncture marks, so we can rule out an overdose of heroin." Then he bent closer to sniff her breath. "Diabetic? But no acetone," Mike said, referring to the sickly-sweet odor that was fairly characteristic—though not always—of a diabetic seizure. "Sleeping pills—? But she's stuporous, not comatose."

Merle was checking her pulse. It was somewhat slow, labored.

"Some rigidity," Mike muttered. "Epilepsy, grand mal? But there is no laceration of the lips—"

Ellen Carey, standing at his shoulder, breathed a word which made Mike start. Merle heard the word also. It was, "Catatonia."

Mike stared at Ellen for a second. He looked to the patient again and shook his head. "Diabetes or hypoglycemia, probably the latter," he said decisively. "Miss Asquith, please set up the tests. In the meantime, prepare an I-V drip, five percent glucose and water, for injection if necessary when the lab reports back. Start taking her blood pressure, and continue."

An ambulance was arriving, and Mike had to move on to it. Merle called Miss Baylor and gave orders that the patient was to be catheterized for sugar content and that a blood test and count were to be made, all stat, as quickly as possible, also that the intravenous drip was to be made ready and that Baylor should start checking blood pressure.

One of the railway men said, "What did the Doc say was wrong with her—?"

"Hypoglycemia. It is a fairly rare disease, roughly the op-

posite of diabetes," Merle told him. "It is characterized by a scarcity, rather than an excess, of sugar in the blood." It could also cause a patient to fall in a coma, though this patient did not seem to be comatose. Perhaps, though, she was emerging.

The man said, "For a moment there I didn't know whether the Doc was going to come up with an answer."

Merle had been doubtful also, for the same reason.

She made out admission papers, listing the woman as Jane Doe. Some minutes passed. Then Viv Daniels, answering a phone, said, "There's something wrong on the women's side. You're wanted."

Miss Baylor, beside Jane Doe's bed, said as Merle approached, "I'm sure glad to see you! This is something you had better check. Her pressure is low and sinking."

Merle held out her hand for Baylor's stethoscope. She tightened the blood pressure cuff, pumped up the mercury column and applied the stethoscope to the cephalic artery at the inside of the patient's arm. Merle listened, taking the high beat; she checked the mercury column, shook her head and tried again.

Jane Doe was breathing hoarsely, in shallow gasps. Her pulse was thin and thready, laboring.

"Shock—?" Baylor suggested.

Ellen Carey's whisper came from behind Merle, "Her eyes—"

They were still only partially closed. Merle thumbed them open. She saw that one pupil was huge, dilated, and the other had contracted to near nothingness.

Less than ninety systolic on her blood pressure reading, and now this . . . "Call Dr. Jablonski!" Merle ordered.

He came at his fast stride, to take her report and then to check Jane Doe's eyes, now using an opthalmoscope.

Mouth tightening at what he saw, Mike swept back a covering sheet. He lifted one of the patient's feet and pressed his thumb hard against its ball. There was a convulsive jerking of muscles in response to that pressure.

"Hyperactive motor center," Mike muttered, referring to the galvanic muscle-quivering. "Her pupillary reflexes are gone, and there is marked papilledema—" This meant that some strong pressure was pushing against Jane Doe's optic nerve. "Miss Asquith, please call the nineteenth floor and ask if Dr. Voss is available—or anyone else on staff in neurosurgery. Say that we have a suspected intercranial hemorrhage."

"Get this bed screened off, Baylor," Merle ordered as she started to turn away. "And bring a spinal tray. Stat—!"

But there was no need for the latter order. Ellen Carey was

already there with the tray. When Merle returned from making the call to the nineteenth floor, the patient was on her side. Mike Jablonski, now wearing sterile rubber gloves, was painting the small of the woman's back with merthiolate. Then he probed the lower vertebrae, seeking a pressure point, before holding out his hand. It was Ellen who placed the long spinal needle in his palm.

Using great care, Mike inserted the stillette which ran down the middle of the needle. He drew it out again. Several drops of red-tinged fluid showed in the pressure gauge. "Blood leaking against her brain and into the spinal fluid," he muttered. "Why in hell didn't I think immediately of the possibility of brain damage from the fall she took? Why did I let it get by me that her bone structure is probably almost paper-thin over the frontal—?"

Mike shook himself. "What about her tests?" he asked.

Miss Baylor answered him. "They have gone to the lab, Doctor."

"Call and say a fast cross-match is required, that up to four units of blood may be needed. Also, get the glucose started." This was necessary to keep the patient's veins open, to prevent them from collapsing as a result of the low blood pressure, which would make transfusion difficult if not impossible. "And," Mike added, "aramine, I-V, ten milligrams." The aramine was to force her blood pressure up a little.

An intercranial hemorrhage meant damage to some blood vessel inside of the skull. Blood was escaping, pressing against the brain. Jane Doe's optic nerve was already affected, shown by her loss of pupil reflexes, and so were her motor center, her respiratory center, indicated by her hoarse, shallow breathing. She was being squeezed to death by the fluid accumulating inside of her head.

Dr. Bernard Voss appeared, the chunky, gray-haired chief of neurosurgery at City General. He listened to Mike Jablonski's hurried reprise of the situation and had a look at the patient. Then he nodded incisively. "No question of it in my opinion, from your findings. I think we'll have to go in, relieve pressure, and seal off the bleeder that is responsible," Dr. Voss said.

The neurosurgeon glanced about. "Who is in charge here?" Then, as Merle indicated herself, his brow wrinkled in surprise. "You are coming along fast, young lady," he commented. "Well, transfer the patient over to me, please."

"Shall we prep her, Doctor?" she asked, hoping this would not be required. Getting Jane Doe ready for the operation awaiting her would put something of a strain on Ward 100.

"No. We'll let my people handle that," Dr. Voss replied. "Now, what about her relatives—?"

He was referring to the regulation that consent from next of kin was required before an operation could begin. Merle said, "We admitted her as Jane Doe, unidentified."

"I see. Then I'll have to get Dr. Bullitt to confirm the diagnosis and sign with me," Dr. Voss decided.

The law permitted this. If no relative was available to consent, the operation could still be performed providing two doctors signed a statement that it was imperative, necessary to save the patient's life.

"Send her up to nineteen immediately," Dr. Voss concluded, and turned to leave.

Mike Jablonski made a sudden eager, pleading sound. The surgeon paused. He said, "Well—?"

"May I scrub and observe, sir?" Mike asked.

Dr. Voss studied him, and the firmness of his lips seemed to soften a little. "Why not?" he replied. "You're the one who spotted this epidural, which I think it is; you ought to see it through. Yes. Come on along, but not to observe. I'll let you assist—"

But he hesitated. "That is," he qualified, "I'll okay your signing off this ward for the time needed, but only if you can be spared."

"We have a Rotating Services intern coming on at four, Doctor," Merle told him. "If you won't be starting before then—?"

"Oh, no," Dr. Voss said, studying his wrist-watch. "With the time required for prepping, cross-matching, determination of anesthetic to be used, plus the double-check diagnosis which I must have . . . I doubt if we can begin to scrub before five."

He smiled at Mike. "Check my chief nurse at four-thirty. She will give you the word. Then come on up."

Dr. Voss left. Merle began to issue orders for the moving of Jane Doe to the nineteenth floor.

Things moved along quickly through the balance of Merle's duty tour. She was busy at the desk and did not have further contact with Mike.

But she thought about him, and about Ellen Carey. Merle spoke to Viv Daniels, "Who made the call that I was wanted on the women's side?"

The ward clerk replied, "Why, I thought it was Miss Baylor."

But a check with Baylor brought a denial of this. "I didn't make any call," the R.N. said, "though I was on the verge of doing so, with that blood pressure sinking!"

So Ellen had called the desk. Ellen had noticed the pupillary reaction; perhaps she had checked Jane Doe's eyes on her own initiative, with a strong suspicion that the woman had suffered an intercranial hemorrhage.

Then the report from the lab on the tests that had been made were delivered to the nursing station, and Mike Jablonski's preliminary diagnosis was proved to be wrong. Jane Doe was not suffering from either diabetes or hypoglycemia; something else had caused her near-comatose condition, and Merle thought of the word Ellen had used, catatonia. She wrote the word on the test report, followed by a question mark, and spoke to Viv Daniels, "Call for a messenger and have this rushed up to Dr. Voss's chief nurse."

Then Merle doodled, while thinking of Ellen Carey.

An aide of considerable hospital experience, Merle told herself, could have acquired a rather large amount of medical knowledge, and this might fully explain all that had happened in the case of Jane Doe.

But it did not explain why Ellen was only an aide, and why, as shown on her personnel record, she had never been anything else, with no apparent effort on her part to become a lab technician or to fill any of the other better-paying jobs available, with training, for one of her obvious intelligence.

There must be an answer that would clear everything up, Merle told herself. However, she shrank from the very thought of prying into Ellen's private life to learn what it was. And perhaps nothing more would happen. Perhaps there would be no further reason to suspect Ellen of anything.

VI

Merle found she could turn the ward over to Agatha Jones and clock out for once at three-thirty. Then she found Sergeant Redding waiting for her. "You called me last night," he said. "Why?"

Merle told him. The sergeant listened attentively, head bent. When she fell silent, "So Lockyer is still around, and we'll have to make another try at finding him here," he commented.

"Do you think there really may be a Joyce Condon?" Merle asked.

"I'll request an immediate check on the name, including a query to the F.B.I.," Redding answered.

He studied Merle thoughtfully, and went on, "Let's review your appraisal of him—malnutrition, when he was brought in after his accident, burning eyes, tightness of features. All of those could be indicative of narcotics addiction."

"You are connecting him with the disappearance of drugs from the hospital—?"

"Yes. And I am aware you know about that, or I wouldn't have brought the matter up," Redding said. "Let's also review something else for a moment. The narcotics cabinet on Ward 100 is locked. There are two keys to the lock. One is kept in a safe at the Nursing Office. The other is held by the head nurse in charge of the ward. Right?"

Merle nodded. "The key must always be in my personal possession when I am on duty," she said. "When I am relieved, I pass it on to the head nurse relieving me."

"And Lockyer might have had a notion that, with luck, the key would be in your possession last night. He might have assaulted you in a try to get his hands on it, if that hospital guard hadn't come along."

Merle felt a little cold, as she thought of this possibility. "He seemed to be tense, last night, and on edge," she reported. "I just can't say, though, whether he might be addicted to the use of narcotics."

"Well, somebody is stealing drugs from City General," Redding said. "For your very confidential information, about twenty grains of morphine have turned up missing so far. Other narcotics have also disappeared in several different thefts."

Merle was startled. This was a considerable amount of morphine.

"A cabinet on an upper floor was broken open and cleaned out some time during a night shift," Redding continued. "Lockyer might have meant to break open the one at Ward 100 on the night when he was surprised and assaulted those two men. I have been told you carry a rather large stock of drugs, including ten grains of morphine."

"Yes," Merle admitted. "In half-grain ampules—"

"He might have decided that trying to break it open was too difficult, and might now be trying to come up with a key that will make a theft easier," the policeman said.

Merle said, "From what you are saying, there have been losses from ward cabinets that weren't broken open. But surely he can't have managed to get keys to all of them—?"

"No. Someone else could have done that, though. I think Lockyer isn't working alone, and also that he isn't stealing solely to take care of his own habit. The money value of all that has been taken so far is considerable. Sold illegally, it could bring in several thousand dollars."

"And he is working with a woman—Joyce Condon—?"

"Perhaps, but also perhaps not. It is more likely Bruce Lockyer handed you a name and a story at random, and that there is no Joyce Condon—or, for that matter, that any woman is involved with him."

"I hope not!" Merle said.

"You are thinking of the possibility he might be working with a City General nurse—?"

"Yes." It upset her very much to think this.

"That doesn't seem likely, either," Redding said. "We have already double-checked every nurse in the hospital without turning up a single reason to suspect any of them."

Then he touched Merle's arm for a moment. "Miss Asquith, I am going to assign a man to keep an eye on you for a while. If you spot the officer involved, ignore him. Please don't try to shake him off, don't try to accomplish anything on your own—and above all, don't take any more chances with Bruce Lockyer!"

Merle went on to her room, after that talk, thinking about it and discovering she simply could not agree with some of the things Sergeant Redding had said.

Doro Speare looked in on her. "I worked O.B. today," the blonde nurse announced. "And did I ever double-check the pit and ergot supply! The light-fingered gent who is raiding narcotics might take it into his head to filch them, too."

Merle nodded in agreement. Pit and ergot, used to ease dif-

ficult labor, could also induce abortion, and those drugs would have a high value in an illegal market. She said, "Gent? Is that a guess, Doro?"

"Of course. I don't have any idea who is doing it—would certainly yell my head off to the police if I did! It might be a woman . . . but no, I won't do any more guessing. The whole thing gives me the jitters. Let's talk about something else."

She lingered a little longer, speaking of her new man. It was rapidly becoming very serious, Merle decided, from the softness of her voice, her fond smile. Then Doro returned to her own room, to get ready for an evening date with him.

Merle tried to start the delayed letter to her parents, but found she was unaccountably restless, found she had glanced several times at her watch without noticing the time, without realizing why she should be interested in knowing what time it was.

Now she did realize this, and dialed Dr. Voss's chief nurse. "About the intercranial for surgery—the Jane Doe patient—?" Merle asked.

"She has gone in, O.R. 3," the chief nurse informed her. "Doctor and those assisting him are scrubbing now."

The letter was forgotten. Merle hurried back to the main building and took an elevator up to the nineteenth floor.

There were wide swinging doors ahead of her. A sign hung on one of the them read: 'Admission Beyond This Point Only To Authorized Surgical Personnel.' Merle turned to the right, climbed a narrow flight of stairs and moved along an equally narrow corridor, passing doors until she reached one marked 'O.R. 3.' She stepped through the door into a blaze of intensely white light.

Seats were arranged in a half-circle, as in a theater balcony, in several rising tiers, with the operating room below. A number of people were already here as spectators, off-duty residents and interns, and also several nurses. It was intensely quiet. Merle found a place and sat down.

The patient was on the table, draped in a pale green sheet with an opening rimmed in white marking the operational area. Jane Doe's ropey hair had been clipped off. Her head had been shaved in front up to the mid-crown point and a little beyond.

The room was somewhat oval in shape, with a glitter of autoclaves for sterilization and of glass-fronted instrument cabinets. A Stevenson respirator was sighing softly. The anesthetist, beyond a shield near the patient's head, was in place. Some doctor whom Merle did not recognize in his green surgical gown and cap and white face mask, was painting the patient's scalp with tincture of zephrin. Two nurses were

waiting, gowned also and wearing bulky turbans. There was a faint astringency of antiseptic in the air, mixed with Septisol, which was used for scrubbing.

Dr. Voss, accompanied by Mike Jablonski, came through a door from Merle's left. Their gloved hands were lifted in oddly priest-like attitudes. Dr. Voss moved to the table, murmuring, "How is she, Doctor Erskine?"

"Coming along nicely, sir," replied the anesthetist, a woman. "She took the sodium pentothal very well. Pressure is presently one-twelve over sixty, fluctuating a little but not markedly so."

"Good," Dr. Voss murmured. He marked the patient's head quickly with a dark stain to indicate where the incisions were to be made, then stripped off his outer gloves and dropped them on the floor. The instrument and sponge nurses were making final swift checks. Mike, holding a Bovie cautery, was checking to make sure its grounding plate was under the patient's hip.

Dr. Voss looked up at the silent, intent audience. "We have here what began as a suspected diabetic or hypoglycemic coma, but which may instead be catatonia," he remarked. "The patient apparently suffered a fall, perhaps as a result of a seizure, with every indication that an intercranial hemorrhage resulted. We'll go in now."

He held out his hand, the instrument nurse placed a narrow-bladed scalpel in it, and surgery began.

Dr. Voss worked with precise care, cutting through the skin and stopping the bleeding with hemostats. The skin was turned back. The incisions proceeded, now into the subcutaneous tissues. The delicate layer of bone that was Jane Doe's skull began to appear.

Mike was at Dr. Voss's elbow, holding a syringe of saline solution in one hand. He irrigated away the blood as it welled up, so the surgeon's field of vision would not be obscured. In Mike's other hand he held the Bovie, using it to cauterize many of the small blood vessels as they were reached and severed.

Merle shifted position. The intense quiet in the gallery, now almost full, continued. More than an hour had passed.

Dr. Voss spoke suddenly, raising his voice above the level of his low orders, of his running exchanges with Mike Jablonski and the other attending physician. He said, "How much blood has she had so far?"

"Nearly a full unit, almost four hundred cc's, Doctor," the anesthetist replied.

"And her pressure is still holding—?"

"Yes. The fluctuation is continuing, but not markedly so. And—" Dr. Erskine's head turned for momentary survey of a

pacer screen nearby, where dancing lines of light showed, accompanied by a low continuing series of beeps "—her heartbeat is quite steady."

"We'll drill, then," Dr. Voss decided.

A buzzing sound began. Burr holes were being drilled, preliminary to the removal of a segment of bone. Tension began to build around the table and in the gallery. The operation was nearing its climax.

It was past the two hour mark before Jane Doe's skull was open. Dr. Voss said, "Rather more fluid than I expected to find—" And, to Mike, "Suction, please. Carefully!" Then, "Doctor Jablonski, what vessel is this?"

"Er—superficial temporal, sir— No! Meningeal—"

"Meningeal it is," Dr. Voss said, referring to the artery branching from the carotid, in the neck, to the dura mater, which was the tough, thick membraneous covering of the brain. "Suction in its area, please. Now right . . . left . . . We'll find the source of the fluid, I think, among the branching veins. More suction, please—and you conduct the search of those veins. Call out when you spot it."

Only a moment later Mike said, "Here, sir!"

Dr. Voss peered closely, and nodded in confirmation that the vein broken when Jane Doe fell had been found. "I wish I had your sharp eyes," he said. "Okay, we'll seal off that bleeder, sponge, and get out. Then—would you like to close, Doctor Jablonski—?"

After a time Merle rose and left, walking a little unsteadily for her legs were quite stiff. She had sat for more than three hours, caught and held by the drama unfolding before her, almost oblivious to the speeding minutes, as were the others who had watched Dr. Voss perform his magic. Or so it had seemed, at least, though years of hard-won experience plus intense concentration and care were more responsible than any magic for the fact that Jane Doe now probably would live after this delicate and exacting feat of surgery.

The sounds of Mike's voice seemed to pursue her as he closed, a clipped, brusque voice, reflecting his inner tension: "Bone wax, please . . . Rongeur—" And, "Two-oh thread, Doctor—?"

"It is your decision to make," Dr. Voss had replied, in answer to that question. "But bear one thing in mind: This is a woman. She may be horrified enough to find her hair gone without also having to carry the dread of an unsightly scar. Keep your stitches neat."

Merle moved to an open window near the nineteenth floor

elevators and stood beside it, with deep breaths of cool night air.

As a result of having been capped high in her class, Merle had been invited after graduation to work on the nineteenth floor. It was said, though, that good scrub nurses were born, not made, and perhaps this was true, for after about six months she had decided surgical work was not for her and had transferred to emergency duty.

During the course of that experience she had learned to size up surgeons and to judge their competence. Mike, Merle told herself now, had conducted himself very well, save for the momentary fumble in naming that artery.

Was he good enough for the exacting standards of neurosurgery? Merle thought he was, and hoped she was right.

The nearby swinging doors whispered open. Dr. Voss appeared in the corridor, face mask removed and hanging by its ties on his chest. He still wore his baggy scrub suit and cap and gown. Recognizing Merle with his pleasant smile, he came to join her, while tucking a cigarette at a weary angle between his lips. "Perhaps you can oblige me with a light, Miss Asquith? I absent-mindedly forgot to pick up some matches, along with my cigarettes, in the locker room—"

Merle, who did not smoke herself, always carried matches for the use of patients. She lighted his cigarette. Then they stood together by the window, the chunky little surgeon breathing deeply also.

"An odd case, our Jane Doe," he commented presently. "After so many years here on nineteen I will admit that an internal medicine diagnosis is a little out of my line, but I would think there would have been something indicative to prevent Dr. Jablonski from going up a blind alley after diabetes or hypoglycemia."

Merle said, "Sir, we don't often get cases at Emergency Admitting which offer us too little to go on, not even a scrap of paper which might be used to learn prior medical history. Also, Dr. Jablonski had to make a quick decision, since another patient had arrived and was demanding his attention."

"I see," Dr. Voss murmured, thoughtfully studying the tip of his cigarette. "Of course, the question remains as to whether there was any indication at the time of his preliminary examination pointing to an intercranial—"

He paused, as though inviting Merle to comment. But she could not say whether there had been anything indicative in the woman's eyes at the time of Mike's first examination. The pressure of the hemorrhage might not yet have begun to affect the pupillary reflexes. Merle hoped this had been true.

"But we'll let that go," Dr. Voss decided. "One fault we

sometimes find among interns is a reluctance to do anything when they are puzzled and at a loss for an answer. Dr. Jablonski at least took action and ordered those tests, stat, which cut the time required to put her on the table. And he retrieved his error, if one was made, by later detecting the intercranial with no damaging delay."

He had not, however, detected it entirely on his own. Nothing, though, was going to pry this bit of information from Merle Asquith.

Dr. Voss blew smoke, sighing pleasurably in a release from strain. "Now there is the intriguing suggestion that she might be catatonic," he continued. "Who put that on the test report? It did not seem to be a man's handwriting—"

Merle confessed she had written the suggestion herself.

Dr. Voss studied her sharply. "What made you think of it?"

She parried this question, "Jane Doe seemed to be stuporous but not comatose, and it was as though she might be emerging from a seizure. Like Dr. Jablonski, though, I didn't think it was epilepsy, and after the test reports ruled out diabetes and hypoglycemia the possibilities seemed to be narrowed down to something like catatonia."

Not for anything, either, would she reveal the suggestion of that had come from a hospital aide.

"Have you ever seen a catatonic?" Dr. Voss asked. Then he smiled, before she could answer, and added, "I have seen only two or three myself in thirty years of practice. They don't appear very often in the average run of hospital work. But it isn't for us, thank heaven, to determine whether that is Jane Doe's trouble. We'll hold her here on nineteen, post-op, until she is out of danger, then send her along to Psychiatry for determination of whether your suggestion is correct."

Catatonia was an affliction of mental disturbance. It seemed likely Jane Doe would be in the psychiatric unit for quite a while.

Dr. Voss continued musingly, "A woman of indeterminate age—younger, of course, than a first superficial guess would indicate if your surmise of catatonia is correct—a woman in very poor physical condition, perhaps a female hobo who swung down from a box car in that railway freight yard only moments before she blacked out, someone who may have to be carried as a charity patient, in mental blankness, for the rest of her life. Was it worthwhile, then, to save her—?"

The others from operating room three's observation gallery were now pouring into the corridor, discussing what they had seen while looking curiously to Dr. Bernard Voss and Merle Asquith.

The surgeon went to a sand jar, stubbed out his cigarette

and returned. "I suppose all of us ask ourselves that sort of question frequently, you in Emergency Admitting, with the dregs of the streets coming in, and I up here, when they reach me," he said. "And there has to be only one answer, which hasn't changed since the first doctor, the first nurse, saw it clearly: To snuff out life, through a withholding or a misuse of one's skill, must be terribly wrong . . . I'll go and check on Jane Doe, now. You run along, Miss Asquith. You look all wound up. Have yourself a date, or something equally pleasant, and unwind!"

She looked after him, his words about a withholding or misuse of skill seeming to echo within her. Somehow they seemed to be coupled in her thinking, very strangely, with Ellen Carey.

This, Merle told herself angrily, was ridiculous. She could not shake it off, though, as she entered an elevator and left the nineteenth floor.

VII

She had her late supper in the staff dining room, which was now, past nine, almost deserted, with the dining room workers already beginning to stack chairs on tables, preparatory to mopping the floor and closing up for the night.

Merle lingered over a second cup of coffee, forcing them to wait on her. She was hoping Mike would come along, but he did not appear. He wasn't in the doctors' dining room, either, when she presently checked there.

Walking slowly along the main corridor, where the last of the evening visitors were leaving, Merle thought of Dr. Voss's suggestion that she unwind, and wished that she could. She thought of Mike, of all that had happened today, and told herself she had to talk to him.

She returned to Ward 100. Jonesy was doing some paper work at the control desk, features puckered and eyes straining behind her thick glasses. She did everything the hard way, Merle thought, watching her. Several moments passed before Agatha Jones became aware of her presence and looked up, starting. "Is—is anything wrong, Merle?" she asked fearfully.

"Of course not," Merle replied. "I merely stopped by for a moment, wondering whether Dr. Jablonski has returned to duty."

"Well, no, he hasn't. He called in a while ago, but when I said things were quiet he decided to take a little more time off and asked that I put a request on the P.A. if he was needed."

Jonesy looked worriedly to the forms spread out on the desk. "The Nursing Office has been at me again because of my ward count reports," she confessed. "I just can't seem to keep them straight, no matter how hard I try."

Merle felt sorry for her. She knew a little about Jonesy, that she had two children and a husband who seemed to be chronically out of work. Other nurses had similar problems, though, and managed to cope with them while still handling their jobs. Jonesy would have to learn to do this, or revert to staff status.

Merle suggested, "Why don't you have a pad handy, and note down every change in a patient's status the moment it happens? I have found it is a good way to keep the ward count straight on my shift."

"That's a great idea!" Jonesy exclaimed. "Thanks for telling me, Merle. You are always so kind!"

Merle told herself wryly that she seemed to be good at solving other peoples' problems. Why couldn't she do something about her own?

The ramp was deserted. It was a very quiet night. Merle hoped Mike was not brooding in his room at Shangri-La. She moved through the men's side of the ward and stepped onto the terrace, with a momentary thought Bruce Lockyer might be there, while remembering the reasons why she could not agree with Sergeant Redding's guesses about him.

Then she saw the red dot of a cigarette in the darkness, and walked slowly toward it.

Mike was sitting at the bench where she had sat last night. His feet were spread apart, his arms were resting on his thighs, and he was staring at the ground, which showed a peppering of the cigarette butts he had discarded.

He looked up as she stopped on the walk, facing him. "I noticed you among the spectators at Jane Doe's opening," Mike said. "I'm sorry that I didn't put on a better performance."

He hurled his cigarette down at the gravel, continuing, "What with one thing and another, this has really been a day for me to foul everything up. Diabetes! Hypoglycemia! How could I have been so stupid as to sound off and commit myself before learning the results of those tests?"

"But you did order them, and they may have helped to save Jane Doe," Merle pointed out. "Everybody makes mistakes at times, Mike, including doctors. You will make your share of them."

She had made some mistakes of her own, functioning as a temporary head nurse, and was probably very lucky none of them had been serious.

"I know," he said. "But—all of those mistakes on one case! Here I am, bucking for neurosurgery, I should be on the alert for every possibility bearing on the specialty I have chosen, should be able to spot brain damage virtually on sight, and yet I let a simple intercranial slide right by me because there was no surface indication of any damage. Why in God's name didn't I make a close check of that woman's eyes there on the ramp the second I noticed her forehead laceration, no matter how unimportant it seemed, before I did anything else?"

There was an agony of spirit in him which it seemed nothing could ease. However, Merle tried. "Even a close check might not have showed anything. Her pupillary reflexes might not yet have begun to go," she said. "I was there, too. I didn't

notice anything wrong. And you know that you'll never let any head injury get by you again without testing for an intercranial."

"Maybe not," Mike muttered. "But this one slip may have been one too many. On top of it, I had to make that stupid mistake about naming the artery. Merle, I know the brain, know every vessel in it. I can trace them in my sleep. I knew it was the meningeal that Voss was indicating, but—so much pressure on me—I seemed to blurt out 'superficial temporal' without being able to stop myself!"

He rubbed his face. "I had grabbed at the chance to assist, in the hope I might prove I knew how to repair an intercranial, at least, even if I was miserably slow in detecting it. Then I had to pull the goof about the artery, one that any first year med student, just beginning to study gross anatomy, could have avoided!"

"While in an operating room, with a patient on the table and a quick reply necessary?" Merle said. "You know better than that, Mike!"

She sat down beside him, put her hand on his arm and squeezed slightly. "Listen to me. I can tell good operating room work when I see it, and you did all right," Merle told Mike Jablonski.

Any invasion of the human brain was a highly chancey business; Jane Doe had been in poor physical condition, and the odds had probably been slightly against her surviving the operation. But she had come through it, and Mike had contributed measurably to saving her.

Merle went on, "Dr. Voss must have thought you did all right, too, or he wouldn't have let you close. Also, he left before you were finished, something he wouldn't have done if he didn't have a lot of confidence in you."

"Why, you're right; I've been so occupied with being sorry for myself that I hadn't thought of that!" Mike exclaimed. "He walked out of the room and left me in complete charge! Maybe he won't down-rate me after all because I made the slip about naming the artery."

Then, relaxing a little, he added, "I feel a good deal better. Merle, thanks a lot for coming to cheer me up."

So she had managed to ease worry and tension for him. This seemed to be her night for doing good deeds. Merle hoped that she hadn't raised any false hopes in Mike. But she still felt he had handled himself very well in the operating room, and it seemed Dr. Voss, with his display of confidence, must hold this opinion also.

Mike went on, "I hope your coming here didn't happen accidentally?"

Merle hesitated, but very briefly. "No," she admitted. "I was looking for you."

Her hand was still on his arm. He put his hand over it. And he chuckled.

"I'm suddenly thinking about my old man," Mike confided. "He was a great guy—never learned to speak English very well, never got any higher in the world than running a junk yard back in New York, but he had the right slant on life. One thing he impressed on me, early and often, was never to feel sorry for myself. He would impress it, if necessary, with a good hard kick where a kick would do the most good. Maybe that is what you should have done to me, Merle—"

She had to smile at the thought of doing such a thing.

"—but I like your way of telling me to snap out of my fit of self-pity. I like it a lot," Mike continued.

Then he kissed her.

As with the other kiss, it would have been quite possible for Merle to have avoided this caress. The pressure of his hand, a change in the timbre of his voice, had told her it was going to happen. But she did not attempt any evasion, nor did she resist his arms as they went about her.

Mike was kissing her firmly, surely, as though everything was settled between them, and thoughts came and went in Merle's head like the darting of wild birds. Accept this, a beguiling whisper seemed to advise; accept it, and settle for what Mike Jablonski was offering—become his wife, and firmly leave behind in the past all else that had happened to her.

Mike could go high in the world, she told herself, and she could help him. They were both young, with many years to share together. Life with him would be an adventure, since he found so much that was zestful in the work for which both of them cared deeply. And he had strength to make her forget the other man she had loved and lost.

Merle returned Mike Jablonski's kisses, for a long moment, and another. She tried, very hard, to put full conviction into her responses, to make them speak of love. But then she wrenched herself free, with the gasp of a sob in her throat. She stood up and walked unsteadily away, several steps, to stop with her back turned to him.

"Mike, there is something I—I must tell you," Merle said.

She simply could not pretend, could not play the cheat with him, for this was what it would amount to if she tried to go on. Such pretending would only lead to misery and disaster for both of them.

Mike spoke quietly, behind her, "You're going to tell me about Phil Crown—that he discarded you, but you cannot discard him—?"

Merle stiffened, thunderstruck, quivering as his words struck deeply into her. She whispered, "Do I show it that plainly—?"

She was so young, and she had been hurt. She must be showing it.

But Mike said, "No. Maybe I have a little extra acuteness about some things, especially one as important as this one is to me. Merle, that business about you not wanting to be touched by another man—I thought it might be dispelled, but I was wrong; its causes go too deep for me to cure. You have a great deal of love for someone, and it almost poured out a moment ago. I wish to God I could unlock it, but I can't. Only one person can do that. You must do it yourself. And there is only one way it can be accomplished."

"Mike, please don't say anything more. Please!"

"That has to be faced," he told her. "You can't continue to torment yourself. Merle, you said that you haven't seen Phil Crown since the—break-up. So you must go to him—"

"Oh, no!" Merle cried. She had a feeling of standing naked, all defenses stripped from her, unable to evade, to pretend, to attempt to ignore what he was saying or to walk away from him.

"You must," Mike said. "You must end what is between the two of you, once and for all. Or—"

"It *is* ended, finished. He is married now—"

"It isn't finished for you. And I strongly doubt that his marriage, considering the way it came about, will deter him very much when he sees you again."

"I can't go to him! You don't know what ha-happened . . ."

She shivered, remembering just how far her affair with Phil Crown had gone, and also the bitter, scarifying things she had said to him when he had told her he was going to marry another woman.

"I don't want to know what happened. I'll never ask, never mention the matter again," Mike Jablonski said. "Merle, if you love him still, if you can never get over loving him, you must face and accept that fact—and do something about it. Perhaps you will discover you can't live without him and must go back to Phil Crown on any terms he wishes, but you are liable to destroy yourself if you keep on tearing yourself to pieces the way you are doing now."

Merle shivered again, understanding quite well what he was saying. She knew of cases in Psychiatry, people caught in strange, remorseless tangles of emotions, their whole beings

shattered by conflicting rages of love and hate. Merle remembered a girl in training who had been driven over the brink by something of the same sort she was facing now. She knew how close she had been for some time to becoming such a case herself, with the recurring moments of depression, desperation and a sense of rushing toward a smash-up she could not seem to avoid.

Mike went on, "I want you; I'll keep on wanting you. But no man can cope with shadows, and the shadow of Phil Crown is between us. I can't get rid of it, Merle. You must do that. Get rid of it forever, or say there is no hope for me. Go and see the man. Learn whether you can live without him!"

Merle put both hands to her cheeks, which felt numb and cold. A man paced slowly past, in the near distance. It was not Bruce Lockyer but someone shorter and heavier, and she remembered Sergeant Redding had said he would assign a man to protect her.

It was too bad, she thought with a sense of dreary forlornness, that no one could protect her from herself.

Mike Jablonski sighed, rising. He came to place a hand gently on Merle's shoulder. "I've said my piece. Now I'll change the subject," he told her. "Who made the first discovery that there was something wrong with Jane Doe's eyes?"

With an effort, Merle wrenched her thoughts away from her own ravening problems. "Mike, do we have to go into that tonight?"

"I have to know," he said. "Ellen Carey was there, ready with the spinal tray. Was she the one who started it all? Was she?"

"Yes," Merle admitted. "It was Ellen who called Viv Daniels, saying I was wanted on the women's side, and Ellen who called my attention to the fact, when I got there, that the patient's pupillary reflexes were gone."

"And also Ellen who made the suggestion about catatonia," Mike muttered. "That hasn't been proved yet, but I have a strong feeling it will be, once the people in Psychiatry get hold of her. Now just how in the devil did Ellen happen to come up with an obscure mental ailment to explain Jane Doe's near-comatose condition, when there was nothing indicative at first sight to suggest that? You saw her also. What was your guess as to her age?"

"About twenty-eight to thirty," Merle replied.

"That was my own first guess—and my second one, when I was working on her in the ward. I considered catatonia then, and rejected it, telling myself she had to be too old. I don't know a great deal about catatonia, but the text-books say in

virtually all cases it is an ailment of adolescence. Then I had a longer look at her upstairs, as she was being prepped, and realized Ellen Carey was probably right, it probably was catatonia, since Jane Doe is eighteen to twenty, no older."

Dr. Voss, Jane thought, had probably reached the same conclusion. And Ellen must have reached it much earlier.

"What a case!" Mike exclaimed. "A female tramp, made to look older by the hard life she no doubt led, and all of my guesses about her were wrong. But Ellen Carey didn't make any wrong guesses. She had catatonia figured at almost first glance—and if the truth were known, she likely suspected on the ramp that the woman was suffering as well from an intercranial hemorrhage."

"It—it may not have been that way at all," Merle protested.

As though she had not spoken, he hurried on, "How did she know those things? There has to be only one answer. Ellen Carey knew because she had seen such a case before, or a number of cases. She recognized from past experience things you and I didn't recognize. Ellen confirmed her findings in the ward and made a hurry-up call to you. She was ready with the spinal tray because she knew what must be done. She knew because she had handled other Jane Does—or John Does—under similar circumstances. And she didn't handle them as an aide!"

Merle asked, "You're saying again that she must have been a nurse at some time? But she couldn't have been a nurse! I checked her record—"

She told him of this. "Everything in Ellen's file is open and shut, Mike, the reports of her previous jobs—"

"All they prove is that an Ellen Carey held down an aide's job in other hospitals," Mike said. "And that Ellen Carey could have been some other woman!"

"How do you explain her fingerprints, and the police check on them?" Merle demanded. "If there was anything wrong in Ellen's past, it would have been uncovered!"

This brought him up short. He sighed, rubbing his face, and Merle realized the Jane Doe operation had left him quite tired, with a long night of work still ahead of him.

"Okay, I can't explain the fingerprints, so maybe I'm off-base about the whole thing," Mike muttered.

"Let's forget it," Merle proposed.

She wished it had never come up. She could never have made out as acting head nurse without Ellen's help.

"I suppose that would probably be a good idea," Mike muttered.

Merle was aware abruptly of being very tired also, of be-

ing almost feverish. There might be a touch of influenza in her; she might report this and sign off duty—

No! Merle told herself sternly. She was not going to be ill. Maybe there was no way to cope with her problems, but she was not going to seek an easy way to attempt to evade them.

Mike glanced toward Ward 100. "Everything still seems to be quiet, yonder," he commented, "so I think I'll make a quick detour to Shangri-La for a shower and fresh gear before reporting back. Will you inform Jonesy for me?"

"Of course, Mike," Merle assured him.

He hesitated for a moment longer. She wondered whether he might try to kiss her again and knew she would not try to avoid him. Merle was even tempted to make the first move herself and kiss him, in another effort to break the spell placed on her by Phil Crown.

But the moment passed, with Mike steadily regarding her, and then he ended it, "Merle, go and see that guy. Find out for sure what he really means to you!"

He walked away, his feet shuffling a little, wearily, against the gravel. She wondered why he had to work such a brutal schedule. It had to do, Merle had been told, with the fact that medicine was a stern, exacting mistress, with internship a time of testing to insure that only the best should survive.

This seemed reasonable, except that sometimes the clever and facile, such as Dr. Philip Crown, managed to survive also. Perhaps, though, they made out because they set their sights low, intent only on getting through the intern's year and enjoying an easy life thereafter. Mike, who had set his own sights high, was being roughly tested.

Merle started toward Ward 100, all that he had said churning about within her. She entered on the women's side. It was dark in the ward now, only a few dim night lights burning, and the quiet indicated all was well here.

She continued on toward the Nursing Station, came to the swinging doors, started to push one open, and stopped dead in her tracks.

The Nursing Station was deserted, save for one person yonder, who was standing behind the control desk—Ellen Carey.

The aide, who wore a dark coat over her uniform, a scarf about her hair, had a tense, furtive manner. She seemed to be looking around, searching for something; her gaze touched the various cabinets, including the one containing narcotics.

A sound of voices suddenly came from the men's side; Jonesy and someone were approaching this big, brightly lighted room. Ellen stiffened. She hurried around the desk,

darted across the room, the ramp beyond, and stepped down from that to the ambulance court. Almost running, she went off along the drive toward High Street.

And Merle, watching her go, remembering the things said to her by both Bruce Lockyer and Sergeant Redding, breathed, "Joyce Condon—?"

VIII

Merle told herself instantly that she was wrong, she must be wrong. There had to be another reason to explain why Ellen had been here at this late hour.

Jonesy came in, with an orderly, and Merle gave her Mike Jablonski's message. Jonesy said, studying her with concern, "Are you all right? You look so pale and strained."

Merle forced herself to smile. "It has been a long, hard day. I'm going straight to bed."

And she did, but lay awake again, and this time there was no respite from the thoughts that tormented her.

Faint sounds came through her door, indicating there was a gathering of nurses at the floor recreation room, probably in nightgowns, pajamas and robes, for coffee and sandwiches and the endless talk about patients, about the hospital and about doctors. Merle had frequently taken part in such sessions herself. She remembered how they had helped to ease the homesickness she had felt upon first entering training.

Her training days . . . They were only a little more than two years behind her, but seemed ages in the past. So much had happened to her, love and the loss of love, and the heavy weight of responsibility. Merle tonight felt old and worn.

She racked her brain and could think of nothing that would explain why Ellen Carey had been at the Nursing Station so late in the evening. She could not forget Ellen's display of near-panic, and the way she had almost been running as she hurried down the drive.

There had to be a reason, though. She would question Ellen casually tomorrow. Merle told herself to let it all go until then.

But she could not let it go. Merle remembered the reasons why she had not been able to agree with Sergeant Redding's reasoning about Bruce Lockyer—for she had talked to Lockyer, and the policeman had not. She had heard the tone of the man's voice when he had spoken of Joyce Condon, a person who was very real to him.

Of course, if Lockyer was irrational, mentally unbalanced . . . But Merle did not believe this, not after their second meeting.

Could Ellen Carey possibly be Joyce Condon, in spite of the logical reasons listed to Mike which proved she was only

what she seemed to be? Could she be involved somehow with Bruce Lockyer—?

"Stop it!" Merle cried aloud in her silent room.

She got up, found a phenobarbital tablet, broke off a piece and swallowed this, then returned to bed again and slept so heavily that it was difficult to force herself awake when the alarm clock clamored at five-thirty.

Merle had a warm shower and a dash of cold water—but, leaving the bathroom, she felt tired and logy; again, she felt almost ill. However, her eyes were clear and her tongue seemed to be all right; additionally, recourse to thermometer and pulse indicated nothing was wrong—except in her head, Merle told herself wearily, where she could find no peace.

She felt as though she were being pulled apart by wild horses, all straining in different directions, horses that were symbols for Phil Crown, Mike Jablonski, Ellen Carey.

Doors were opening and closing throughout the home, with hurried footsteps in the corridors, day nurses heading for duty. Merle joined them. Trudging wearily up the steps and on to the dining room, she began to rehearse what she would say to Ellen, with the hope there would be an immediate answer to dispel all of her fears.

Then she checked onto the ward, but Ellen did not. Ellen was not there, as seven o'clock came. A feeling of premonition began in Merle, that Ellen was not going to show up at all. She tried to dismiss this. Ellen was still absent, though, as time passed, as seven-twenty came, with a messenger appearing from the Nursing Office for the day's duty report, showing those who were at work, which she must initial and turn over to him.

Merle spoke to Viv Daniels, "Has Ellen reported that she is ill?"

She greatly hoped the answer would be yes.

The ward clerk gave her a surprised look. "Why should she do that? It's her day off—and tomorrow, too—"

"Oh," Merle said. She had forgotten about this, had forgotten to check the work schedule, which showed days off, and for a moment she felt relief so great that it almost made her giddy.

Viv Daniels went on, "She thought for a while yesterday afternoon that she might have to work today, but word came through that a relief was available to fill in for her. Nobody has shown up yet, though."

However, a relief aide did appear a few minutes later, someone so new to the hospital she had become lost, trying to find Ward 100.

"You won't get much work to amount to anything out of

that one," Viv Daniels predicted pessimistically. "Why don't you call Ellen and ask if she would like to put in some extra time?"

"No," Merle decided.

A great deal could happen during Ellen's two days away, she told herself. The police might finally manage to find Bruce Lockyer. Or she might see him again herself—and if she did, Merle thought firmly, she did not intend to let the man get away before she learned about Joyce Condon, all about her.

Mike was not on duty. He was on his twelve hours off, and would not return to work until along into the evening shift. Two interns had reported from Rotating Services. There was not a great deal to do. This was one of the quiet mornings which occurred inexplicably every now and then.

City General's superintendent of nurses, Mrs. Mollison, a tall, quiet-mannered woman, appeared unexpectedly at ten o'clock. Merle, snapping to attention, accompanied her somewhat anxiously on a tour of inspection through both sides of the ward.

They came out on the ramp, where the superintendent checked the gurneys, the neat piles of blankets, ready for use. Then, "You are doing very well, Miss Asquith, considering the trying circumstances," she said. "And I am afraid they must continue for a while longer. I talked to Mrs. Boswell this morning. She has had rather a severe time of it, and her Doctor wants her to rest a little longer, two or three more days, perhaps, before she returns to take charge here."

And, with a faint smile, "I hope you won't regret having to go back to staff work."

"Oh, no!" Merle said. She had learned a lot, but she had also discovered there was so much she did not know about nursing.

If Mrs. Boswell had been here when Jane Doe was brought in, the experienced head nurse probably would have directed Mike Jablonski's attention at once to the possibility of an intercranial hemorrhage.

Mrs. Mollison said, "You have proved you can handle a ward, and you will have one of your own before very long, probably by the time you are twenty-five. That is—if you want one—?"

"Yes," Merle replied. "I want one."

The present was so filled with activity that she had not done much thinking about the future. Now she realized that she would probably always be a nurse—there did not seem to be much else ahead of her—and she also knew that she would like to go as high as she could in her profession.

"Good," Mrs. Mollison said. "I will put a letter of com-

mendation in your file, for the work you have done, subbing for Mrs. Boswell. It will help when you take the head nurse's exam."

She started to leave, then, but paused for a moment longer. Something else was on her mind—Agatha Jones. "I have heard you are giving her all of the help you can, and that is greatly appreciated," the superintendent said. "Poor woman, she has so many problems—"

And so did Merle Asquith, but she had to grapple with hers alone.

Later in the day, she was on the ramp again. The two interns, idle for a moment, were talking—about the City General residencies, Merle discovered, and she interrupted them to ask, "Have the appointments been announced yet?"

One of them, a cherubic-featured, plump young fellow named Dr. Cohill, answered her, "Nope. The oral interviews haven't been given yet. They're scheduled for tomorrow, and what a rat-race that is! Three solid hours or so of being questioned about everything in medicine, including a lot of things you've either forgotten or never heard of. The whole medical board has a go at you, as well as outside specialists that they bring in."

"I'm not due for it until June, but I'm already starting to get ready for that grilling," the other intern commented. He was taller, older, quite serious of manner, named Dr. Harper.

"You can have it," Dr. Cohill said. "The odds are too high against grabbing off a residency in this place. And if you lose out, word gets around. It's a strike against you when you apply somewhere else."

"I'm still going to give it a try," Dr. Harper said.

"Suit yourself," Dr. Cohill told him. "Me, I plan to send out a lot of applications and I'll accept the first offer that comes in from some hospital where I know I can make the grade. Since I'm bucking for Gynecology, I know there'll be plenty of opportunities. Women spend more time in hospitals than men!"

This talk gave Merle additional and worrisome information about what Mike was trying to accomplish. She asked a question that she could not hold back, "Do you think Dr. Mike Jablonski will make it?"

"I hear he's a cinch," Dr. Cohill replied.

"Nobody is ever a cinch for a residency here," Dr. Harper disagreed. "Mike is good. I'll go farther than that; he is very good. But so are a lot of other applicants. I'm pulling for him, but I'm kind of scared he might miss out."

Viv Daniels called Merle then. She was wanted on a phone.

Merle heard Ellen Carey's voice, "I've been feeling a

little worried that things might be piling up on you today," the aide said.

"No, we're making out fine, Ellen," Merle responded. "It seems this is going to be a quiet day."

Then bracing herself, "I had a glimpse of you here at the ward yesterday evening, rather late. I wondered if something was wrong—?"

"Wrong? It was only that I discovered I had lost something, a small locket on a chain," Ellen responded. "I returned, hoping to find it. The clasp is loose, several times I have put it down at various places, and I thought I might absent-mindedly have done that again. But I didn't have any luck."

"I'll ask everybody to look for it," Merle said.

She felt a sense of shaken relief. There had been, after all, a logical reason for Ellen's presence here yesterday evening. And though no explanation had been offered for the fact the woman had almost been running when she left, Merle told herself there must have been a good reason for that, also.

It did not seem to matter, though. There was still no valid reason, other than Mike's guesses, to suspect her of anything. And Mike had agreed last night he was no doubt off-base in his thinking.

Merle returned to Ward 100 that night near eleven. With Ellen Carey removed from her worries, Phil Crown had taken over. She felt that she had to talk to Mike again about him. Also, Merle was impelled to tell Mike she wished him well in his ordeal tomorrow, that she would be praying he would win his residency.

Stepping through the automatic doors onto the ramp, she saw an ambulance parked on the drive, with the driver and attendant chatting beside it. She started toward the Nursing Station—and discovered Mike, sitting on a bench, slumped back against a wall. He was sound asleep.

This was something that could be fairly serious if a supervisor or resident were to find him. Not that interns did not occasionally doze on this sort of duty, but usually with more discretion. Merle shook him. "Mike, for heaven's sake, wake up!"

He blinked at her, and yawned, heavily. "Did I drop off? Sorry. I had only a couple of hours' sleep today."

"Only a couple—! Why?"

"I went downtown, spent the time going through back files of newspapers, trying to find a reason for my hunch about Ellen Carey."

Merle was instantly very angry. It was something she could

not seem to hold back. "You promised me you would forget about that!"

"No," Mike replied. "I said I thought it would probably be a good idea to forget about Ellen, but I didn't make any promise. And I found today that the hunch was still in me, stronger than ever—"

"I won't have any more of this!" Merle cried. "You're going to promise me, right now, that you will forget it!"

"I'm sorry, but I can't let it go," Mike said.

"You will! And of all the stupid things to do, missing out on sleep on the day before your oral interview for the residency—!"

"That is my business, Merle. Anyway, I'll be relieved at six tomorrow morning, and I'm not due to appear before the board until one in the afternoon."

"It was still stupid! Mike, please promise—!"

"No," he said. "Merle, you had better learn right now that you can't push me into forgetting something that I feel I must do—"

"Oh, you—you hard-headed Pole!" she cried, and wheeled away, leaving him, going tempestuously down the drive past the ambulance, and like Ellen last night she was almost running.

Merle turned to her left on High Street. Hugging herself, she walked fast, alongside an iron-picket fence at this side of the terrace. Where the fence ended, she turned in at the pleasant gardens surrounding the Orthopedics Building, went between that building and the ramshackle frame units which included Shangri-La; she came out on another street which ran eastward, crossing the railroad tracks nearby.

Merle headed eastward also, crossed High Street, then turned and started back on its other side.

Anger still simmered in her as she approached a large parking lot, located across from Ward 100, where members of the staff who lived away from the hospital kept their cars. But Merle knew it was wrong to be angry, knew that becoming furious with Mike would not gain her anything. She must go back and apologize, try to reason with him.

A sudden frantic, high-pitched cry came from somewhere before her, at the parking lot, a woman's scream. It was repeated, and it had a strangely familiar sound. Merle began to run. She veered into the parking lot, working her way between cars. She came out at an open space, somewhere near the center of the lot, and had an impression of someone whom she could not quite see, someone who was running, off to her left, out of the lot at its rear.

There was an arc light on a high pole at the street. By its

illumination, Merle saw a woman in a white uniform, prone against blacktop paving.

Merle hurried to drop to one knee beside her. She saw pale hair and familiar features which were distorted and blurred by a smear of blood. She gasped, "Doro!"

Another thin scream came from Doro Speare. Then, struggling frantically to lift herself, trying to crawl away from Merle, she mumbled a fearful plea, "Don't hit me again; please don't—!"

IX

Doro's uniform had been ripped and torn. There was a cut on one cheek, and another at her mouth.

Merle put out a hand to restrain her. "It's me, Doro! Don't try to move. Nobody is going to hurt you again."

Doro stopped trying to crawl. She lay against the blacktop again, her cheek resting on it, and she wept, hysterically.

Merle wriggled out of her cardigan sweater and put it under the woman's head. Footsteps were pounding toward her, coming from across the street. Mike arrived on the scene, with the two men from the ambulance close behind him.

Mike knelt beside Doro, beginning a quick check of her injuries. Merle, standing up, said, "What in the world was she doing here—?"

The ambulance attendant remarked that Doro had suddenly headed down the drive only moments ago, moving at a fast pace and cutting across toward the parking lot. She had not said anything to explain where she was going, or why.

Mike said, "Two facial lacerations and perhaps other injuries. Go and bring a stretcher. We'll take her to the ward."

Doro moaned raggedly. Then a police car with its red blinker working wheeled into the lot. Sergeant Redding got out. He listened, tight-lipped, to Merle's hurried report, and told the man with him to make a search beyond the rear of the parking lot.

"You have Lockyer's description; this may be his work, so keep your eyes peeled for him," Redding directed. "There'll be some help along within a couple of minutes."

As the other policeman hurried away, Redding bent down to Doro. "Can you tell me what happened?" he asked her.

Mike said, "She isn't in very good shape to talk just now."

"Maybe not," the Sergeant said. "But I want something to go on. Well, Miss—?"

"Jonesy left," Doro mumbled. "I was trying to head her off. She didn't turn over—narcotics key—"

Doro began to weep again. The two from the ambulance were back with a stretcher. Doro was gently placed on it.

Merle said, "Sergeant, maybe I can explain. This is Doro—Dorothy—Speare. She works as a relief head nurse, must be subbing for Mrs. Hanes, and must have just taken over the night duty on Ward 100. What she said was that Jonesy,

while making her report, didn't give her the key to the narcotics cabinet—though I can't imagine Jonesy failing to do that, or Doro not noticing at the time—"

It apparently had happened, though. Jonesy, with her fumbling, might have forgotten, and Doro, perhaps preoccupied with the details of the ward she must handle until morning, might not have noticed until the other nurse was gone. Then Doro had hurried to the parking lot, hoping to intercept Jonesy before she could drive away.

Sergeant Redding said, "Let's go over to the hospital."

The stretcher was being carried across the street, Mike walking beside it, holding Doro's hand and talking to her soothingly. Redding and Merle started to follow. He took her arm. It was as though, Merle realized, he thought she might try to break away, though she couldn't imagine why he should think that. And she found herself wondering how he had managed to arrive on the scene so quickly.

Another police car wheeled into the lot. The Sergeant paused to issue orders to the two men riding in it. Then he and Merle went on. They came to the ramp—to discover Jonesy there, staring wide-eyed at Doro, who was being carried past her and on inside.

Jonesy gasped, "Merle, what has happened—?"

Redding squeezed Merle's arm, a warning that she was to keep quiet. He told Jonesy what had happened, and stated the reason Doro had given for being at the parking lot.

"But I did turn the key over to her!" Jonesy protested. "We double-checked the drug inventory; Doro wanted to be absolutely sure it was correct. Then there was a phone call. Doro took it, an inquiry about a patient, she said, and she started reading information off the ward report. The call was about a woman patient, a heart case—"

"Just a moment," Sergeant Redding interrupted. "Did the inventory of that narcotics cabinet check out accurately?"

"Oh, yes!" Jonesy said. "And it was while Doro was talking on the phone that I turned the key over to her—at least, I showed it to her and laid it down on the desk. Then I left the ward, but I didn't leave the hospital. I went to the Nursing Office. There had been a question about one of my ward count reports, and I wanted to be certain I had made the right corrections. Afterwards I clocked out and stopped by here again to make sure I—I hadn't made any more mistakes in turning the ward over to Doro. She was gone . . ."

Redding was frowning. The possibility that a narcotics key was missing seemed to bother him, though Merle could not see that the ward's stock of drugs was in danger. There had not been time enough to use the key.

Jonesy said, "Maybe the key is still where I left it!"

She turned and scurried into the Nursing Station. Redding called sharply, "Wait! I'll do the looking!"

His hand was still on Merle's arm as they moved into the big room. Then he released her and went around the desk. Its top was rather cluttered, by several kinds of reports on clipboards, as well as by loose papers scattered here and there. Merle also noted a metal chart binder, no doubt the chart of the patient about whom someone had called, according to Doro's statement to Jonesy.

Sergeant Redding moved things about. He lifted several of the loose papers and then pointed to what had been hidden under them. He said, "Is this the key—?"

Merle and Jonesy answered him together, "Yes!"

It was a rather large key, on a metal chain, with a prominent tag affixed to the chain.

Redding's frown persisted as he studied the key. He said, "I'll want another check, immediately, of that cabinet—"

An ambulance siren whined softly on the drive. Mike came in from the women's side of the ward. "I have ordered a sedation for Doro and she will soon be asleep," he reported.

Redding said tightly, "Why didn't you check with me before doing that, Doctor? I wanted to question her further."

"I know you did," Mike said. "But she was hysterical, in pain, and I felt she needed immediate sleep and rest."

"I wished to ask if she knew who assaulted her," Redding said. "Did she perhaps say anything about that?"

"No," Mike replied.

"When can I talk to her?"

"Tomorrow morning. I think a night here will be all she needs. Doro was struck two or three times in the face by either a fist or some hard or possibly jagged object, judging by the cuts on her face. There are apparently no bone fractures; we'll x-ray later to make sure. She also took at least two blows to the body, with bruises beginning to show. Now, I have other work to do."

Mike continued on to the ramp, where a patient was being removed from the ambulance which had just arrived.

Redding looked after him. Jonesy suddenly leaned over the desk and picked up the narcotics cabinet key. She said, "Merle, will you help me make the check again?"

"Yes," Merle agreed. "I had better call the Nursing Station first, though. This ward has to be covered for the rest of the night."

She made an offer over the phone to take the duty herself, knowing this meant she would probably have to continue working right on through the day shift tomorrow. The night

supervisor told her, however, that somebody else would be found and sent along to take over.

The cabinet was now open. Merle picked up the drug dispensing report, on its clipboard, from the desk, and went to begin calling off the items as Jonesy counted. Redding, joining them, said, "I want to see just how you do this; I want to make a check myself of everything in that cabinet."

Merle explained the procedure, how sedations and narcotics given on each shift were noted both on patients' charts and on the dispensing report, with an extra summation report for the Nursing Office which both the incoming and outgoing head nurses must sign, to indicate their count tallied exactly with the totals that were shown.

When the check was finished, the summation report was proved correct, to the last fractional grain. The key had been loose on the desk for several minutes, with Doro gone, but obviously no use had been made of it.

Merle said then, "Jonesy, you look very tired. Since you have already clocked out, why don't you go on home? I'll wait and look after things here until the replacement shows up."

She thought for a moment that Sergeant Redding might object. However, after watching while the cabinet was closed and locked, he left to check on what his men were doing. Jonesy thanked Merle gratefully and went away, heading down the drive and across to her car at the parking lot.

Merle went to assist Mike. The new patient was a teen-aged boy who had been cut in a knife-fight. As Merle began to make out an admission ticket, Mike told her he wanted to move the boy along to Emergency Operating; there was a possibility he would need some blood. Merle made the calls to alert Emergency O.R. and the lab. Mike, assisted by a night duty orderly, trundled the boy away.

The time was now past midnight. Merle put things at the Nursing Station in order. She noted the admissions of both the new patient and Doro Speare on the ward count report, opened charts for both of them, then went for a look at Doro, to find her sleeping peacefully, pulse and temperature only a little above normal. A night aide, moving about on the women's side, said the sedation had taken hold quickly.

Two small bandage pads showed on Doro's face, one on her right cheek, the other at the corner of her mouth. There would be discoloration tomorrow, and lingering pain.

There were questions for Merle, now: Was Doro's pain her fault? Was there something she could have done to avoid its infliction?

Merle returned to the Nursing Station to find it empty. The

relief head nurse had not arrived. The drive was empty, also. Merle realized there must be many moments such as this during the night hours, the Nursing Station deserted or only the head nurse here. There was supposed to be an R.N. on night staff work, but the one assigned was off duty, on the influenza list.

Merle was standing in the open ramp door, still plagued by the questions about Doro, when Mike spoke from behind her, "I'm glad you are still here."

She started. He had approached her silently, coming in from the men's side on his white, crepe-soled shoes. Words burst from Merle, "Mike, I'm so sorry about losing my temper! I didn't mean what I said, and was coming back to tell you when I heard Doro scream."

Mike managed a wry smile. "If you didn't mean it, you should have," he said. "I'm just as hard-headed as you are. I suppose sparks are always going to fly when we come together. But Merle, I still can't give you the promise you want. I can promise you something else, though. If I do find out anything about Ellen, I'll do all I can to see that she isn't hurt."

Merle still felt certain there was nothing to find out. But, "I know you will, Mike," she said.

He blinked, then. She noticed a puffiness, a redness, about his eyes. He muttered. "I feel as though I'm being pulled apart. I hope I don't come unstuck before the oral interview is finished tomorrow . . . Merle, what was the reason for Doro's beating? Who is it that the cops are hunting—?"

She felt a stir of surprise. "His name is Bruce Lockyer. He is the one who assaulted those two men here in the Nursing Station that night nearly a week ago. Don't you remember—?"

Merle almost added as a further reminder that it had been the night when Mike had first kissed her. She went on, telling about Bruce Lockyer and about the narcotics thefts. She did not mention her two meetings with the man, nor did she mention Joyce Condon. Merle feared that if she spoke of the woman Lockyer had named, Mike would immediately leap to a conclusion which she still felt was wholly wrong, linking her with Ellen Carey. And she concluded, "There has been some talk on the ward about Lockyer. Haven't you heard it—?"

He shook his head. "I've been too preoccupied with other things—you, and also the residency appointment—to pay much attention to ward gossip," Mike replied.

Then he sent a thoughtful look about the Nursing Station, and continued, "It seems to me that if all you say is true, an expatient hiding somewhere below us who may have attacked Doro tonight, with no luck so far in finding him,

there may be a way to bring the guy out and grab him. I'm surprised the cops haven't thought of it—"

A phone clamored, at the desk. Merle went to answer. She listened, and said, "Mike, Emergency O.R. says the patient you checked in there is taking a turn for the worse. They want you."

He left, hurrying away. Merle was alone again, to wonder what Mike had meant, with his last words. But she did not have an opportunity to wonder for very long. Sergeant Redding came striding back up the drive and into the Nursing Station. He asked for the use of a phone and Merle gestured wordlessly to the desk, where there were three of them.

She did not try to eavesdrop. However, Redding did not lower his voice. He was asking for additional men. Redding wanted to begin another search of the hospital's sub-levels, at once. He said, "Yes, I know it sounds silly, all of the hunting we've done so far and we haven't been able to find the fellow we're after. But you haven't seen the basements in this place! . . . Okay, send me what you can, and I'll ask the hospital security guards to help us again."

The sergeant hung up. He lighted a cigarette and studied Merle as measuringly as Mike had, as though trying to guess everything she was thinking. He said, "Well, you heard. We've had no luck at all."

Merle said, "You think definitely it was Lockyer—?"

"If you can see any signs that point to someone else, I wish you would tell me what they are," Redding replied. "Look, Miss Speare was here at this desk, talking on the same phone I just used, according to what Mrs. Jones told us. She hung up, noticed Mrs. Jones was gone, and thought the narcotics key had not been passed to her custody. She also thought she could catch Mrs. Jones at the parking lot, so she ran out, down the drive and across the street."

He drew hard on his cigarette. "Somebody was there, watching the ward. I've discovered you can look right into this room from that lot. Somebody was there, maybe thinking of coming in here if he had a chance and of breaking the narcotics cabinet open, using some sort of tool. He saw those two women together, and probably knew what was happening, the night nurse coming on duty. He saw Mrs. Jones leave, then saw Miss Speare suddenly coming right toward him—with a great opportunity to grab the key which he must have thought was in her possession. All he had to do was slug her, take it, and make a run at this place, which was wide open for him. He probably figured to get over the fence and into this room from the terrace. But he didn't slug her hard enough. She screamed. I think that upset him; such guys usually do

react violently when the unexpected happens. He kept on slugging her, at the same time tearing at her uniform, trying to get at its pocket, thinking the key was there. Then you came along, and he ran."

Redding stubbed his cigarette out. "For my book, it is open and shut that he was Lockyer. You still say you didn't see him?"

Merle replied, "I heard someone running, but I couldn't make out who it was. I can't say any more than that."

Redding came back around the desk, approaching Merle as though to put his next question at closer range. "Okay," he said. "Now I'll ask something else: What was the reason why you happened to be there? You were supposed to be off duty, but you suddenly showed up at that parking lot. Why?"

Merle said, "I—I came to the ward to see Dr. Jablonski. He had been off duty today, and tomorrow he must face something that is very important to him. It is going to be pretty—rough—"

She explained about the residency appointment, her desire to wish Mike luck. And why hadn't she already told Mike that she did wish him well, with all her heart? She must do so, without fail, before he left.

"I see," Redding said, when she let her voice trail off. "But you still haven't explained how you happened to be at the parking lot."

"Dr. Jablonski became busy. I left him, and walked up to the Orthopedics corner," Merle answered. "I went through the gardens there, then crossed High Street and started back. I hoped there would be a chance to talk to him again, and was intending to return to the ward."

Redding pinched his chin thoughtfully. "Well, I know you headed toward the Orthopedics building," he conceded, "and you did it rather fast, since you shook off that man of mine who was keeping an eye on you. He reported to me, and I came to check up—"

The relief nurse entered at that moment, to take charge of the ward. Merle had to give a report, going over the charts of all patients, checking the various records which would be returned to her when she came on again for the day shift. She did not bother with another narcotics count; there had been enough of that already.

It was nearly one before all of this was completed. By then still another police car had arrived, and Redding was issuing orders to four more men. Going to him, Merle asked, "Do you want me for anything more?"

"Not tonight," Redding decided. "I would like for you to go along to your room, right now. And to make sure nothing

more happens I am going to send someone with you to see that you get there."

So the chance to talk further to Mike, to wish him well, was gone. She must find a way to do that, Merle told herself, before his ordeal began tomorrow.

X

Doro Speare was released from the ward before eight the following morning, but Merle did not have a chance to speak to her. Sergeant Redding was waiting for Doro, who came from the women's side escorted by a female police officer. Doro wore an attractive Navy blue suit, nylons and pumps; Merle supposed they had been brought from her room by the woman officer, and regretted she had not thought of doing this herself.

Redding looked tired, as though he had been on duty all night. Merle spoke to him tentatively, while he waited, "Any luck—?"

He shook his head, no. So Bruce Lockyer was still at large.

Doro appeared in the Nursing Station, smiled wanly at Merle and waved to her. She left with the two, they entered a police car and drove away, so presumably Doro was being taken elsewhere, perhaps downtown, for questioning.

It was a hectic morning. Merle did not have a free moment until almost noon, when she asked the operator for Mike's number and dialed it. The phone in his room rang for some time before there was an answer, from an intern who reported Mike was not there, nor did his bed seem to have been slept in. "He's up for that interview this afternoon, so maybe Doctor J. is in a bar somewhere, downing a couple of stiff ones," the intern remarked. "I know that is what I would be doing if I was in his place!"

Merle, who felt certain Mike was doing no such thing, asked the operator to put his name on the P.A., requesting that he call her. But he did not call, as further time passed.

At one o'clock, Merle breathed a prayer for him.

The afternoon seemed to crawl then, endlessly, with Merle's nerves tightening as in spirit she shared Mike's ordeal. The years of grinding effort, of study and very hard work—college, medical school and internship—were ending this afternoon, he would soon know whether he had gained the goal he had sought during those years, and there was nothing Merle could do to help him other than to wait and pray.

It was strange; a week ago she had not even been aware of Mike Jablonski's existence and now Merle was caught up in this straining concern for him—which replaced her other worries for the time being, but the burden of waiting, of ten-

sion, became almost intolerable as the day slowly wore along.

At around three there was a call from Mrs. Mollison's office. "I noticed yesterday that you are quite tired," the superintendent of nurses said. "And while I don't know your days off schedule, I want you to check out tomorrow; fortunately, I can cover the ward. Leave the hospital, try to forget it all for a while. I think Mrs. Boswell will be on duty again when you return."

It amounted to an order. Merle thanked her.

Mrs. Mollison went on talking, now about last night's incident, and Merle discovered she had visited Doro at six this morning.

"I feel deeply for her," the superintendent said. "After studying the reports of the matter I cannot see where anyone is to be blamed. It was fortunate you were so quickly on the scene, since it seems your arrival frightened the attacker away, and you probably saved Miss Speare from further injury."

Merle hoped this was true. She swallowed her fourth aspirin of the afternoon and watched the clock crawl at a leaden pace. The logy feeling persisted in her, the sense of near-feverishness.

She had stepped on the bathroom scale this morning, to discover she had lost eight pounds since Mrs. Boswell had become ill. She could not afford to lose any more. Her figure was too slender, a slenderness Phil Crown had greatly admired—

No, she told herself, no! She must not think of Phil.

Jonesy came in late, past four, with a hurried babble of excuses. Merle said. "It doesn't matter. Let's get the report out of the way."

Mike's ordeal should be over now. She must find him and learn how it had gone, as soon as possible.

Jonesy wanted to talk about last night, with fearful questions which added to Merle's sense of strain. "Everything is all right; you aren't being blamed," she said, and almost added a plea that Jonesy try to get through one shift without trouble. But Merle managed to withhold these words. Jonesy was much older than she was. It did not seem right for her to scold the woman. She managed to smile, adding, "It isn't likely that anything will happen tonight."

"I hope not," Jonesy sighed. "If I can only keep my ward count report straight—!"

Merle asked the operator to request Mike to call her, as soon as he could be located. Then she went along to the nurses' home, there to discover Doro in the lobby, accompanied by a man, apparently the new one of whom Doro had been speaking.

His name was Carl Hardin. He was about thirty, with a hard-driving young executive sort of manner. He was very attentive to Doro, and she reciprocated with a fond, smiling manner which indicated that, as she had stated to Merle, she had come quite soon to care for him.

Carl Hardin was indignant about last night's assault; so was Merle, as she studied the bandage pads on Doro's face and the purple discolorations of her features. But Doro deprecated their concern.

"Everybody is fussing over me," she said, "when actually it was mostly my fault. I behaved pretty stupidly—trying to cover for Jonesy; I thought she had goofed, and should have checked more closely to find out for sure. All I was thinking about was to head her off, if I could, because I knew she would be in bad trouble if I had to call the Nursing Office and report she hadn't turned the narcotics key over to me. So I rushed out and became involved with whoever is pulling those drug thefts. At least, the police think that is why I was slugged."

Doro went on to reveal she had spent part of the morning downtown, being questioned. She had also been asked to look at some photographs of known drug thieves, but had not recognized anyone.

"I couldn't tell the police very much," Doro said. "The first blow smashed me right in the face. It hurt terribly, and almost blinded me. I knew I was screaming, that I was being hit again and again—"

There was a haunted expression on her bruised features for a moment. She took Merle's hand, squeezing hard. "If you hadn't come along, it might have been so much worse!"

Her x-rays had indicated no fractures, Doro went on, and she should soon be all right again.

Carl Hardin had to leave. Doro accompanied him to the lobby door. They kissed, and he went away, toward the circular drive. Doro turned and came to rejoin Merle—who, noticing an abrupt change in the pale-haired woman's manner, hurried to put a supporting arm about her. "You belong in bed!" Merle said.

"Yes," Doro agreed faintly. "But I had to see him, had to pretend everything was all right. I couldn't add to his worries about me."

Merle helped her into the elevator. "I always thought love meant thrills and excitement, but I was wrong," Doro sighed. "It is something quiet, and gentle, and very real. Carl and I are going to be married, soon."

She leaned like a tired child against Merle, who said, "I'm

glad, Doro. And you must rest; you must be pretty again for him."

"Yes," Doro said. "I can't go to the altar with a black eye!"

Merle helped her on to her room. She undressed Doro, wincing as she saw the dark marks on her body, and got her into bed. Then, "If you would like me to stay for a while—?"

She could hear her phone ring when Mike's call came. However, Doro replied, "No. I won't sleep, but I want to do some dreaming, about Carl."

"Well—" Merle started to leave.

Doro stopped her, as she reached the bathroom door, "Merle, there is something you must know. I told the police that I am certain a woman did this to me."

Merle stiffened. Doro hurried on, "And I almost know who it was—not Jonesy, of course, and certainly not you; the police asked about you two, and I said it was ridiculous even to think you might have been involved. It was somebody else, some woman I feel I know, but only slightly. I had an impression of that—of a skirt, and a touch of perfume as she came at me from the side and hit me with something which cut my face. It all happened so quickly. I didn't see her. I've been trying all day to think who she was, but I can't."

A woman . . . and coldness in Merle as she thought of who it might have been, someone Doro would know only slightly, as she had said. Again a question hammered at Merle: Was she herself the one responsible for Doro's beating?

Last night there had been the whisper of a hint in her to explain the assault. Merle had not listened to the whisper then. She knew that she must listen to it now.

"I had to tell you," Doro said, "so you would know, in case the police come and—and start questioning you."

"Yes. Thanks, Doro," Merle said, and went on to her own room.

She was remembering that Doro had substituted for her last week during her two days off. Doro would have noticed Ellen Carey then, but only in passing. As far as Merle knew, it would have been her only contact with the aide; enough for Doro to know her vaguely.

If Ellen had been at the parking lot last night, she would have realized Doro was taking over the ward from Jonesy, would have known, when Doro suddenly came running toward her across the High Street, that the narcotics key should be in Doro's possession.

Merle sat down at her phone, asked for an outside line, and dialed Ellen's number. She did not know what she was going to say, only that she must talk to the woman at once.

Then she discovered there was nothing to be said, for the

rooming house landlady, answering the call, reported that Ellen Carey's room was stripped bare. Sometime last night Ellen had left the place, taking with her the few effects which she owned. "Oh, she was paid up," the landlady said. "But you would have thought she'd have given me some sort of warning—!"

Merle dialed the police number then and asked for Sergeant Redding.

He came quickly, meeting her in the downstairs lobby at a little past five. There still had been no call from Mike.

Redding listened to what Merle had to tell him—about Ellen and her strange displays of medical knowledge, about Mike and his suspicions, which Merle had felt were wrong. She revealed her own knowledge of Doro's statement that a woman had attacked her. Finally, Merle told of the discovery that Ellen was gone.

"I—I suppose it means she is trying to drop out of sight," Merle concluded.

"I would say that is obvious," Sergeant Redding responded.

It was obvious also his reaction to Merle's disclosures was one of extreme anger, which he was holding in check with some difficulty. And he went on, "Why, for God's sake, must people always pick and choose the things they tell the police? Didn't it ever occur to you this Ellen Carey might be the Joyce Condon that Bruce Lockyer was hunting—that the two might be working together, stealing narcotics—?"

"Yes," Merle admitted, and told of the night when she had come in from the terrace to see Ellen at the Nursing Station. "But she told me later that she was there only to look for a lost locket—"

"She was ready to say anything to keep you from becoming suspicious!"

"Sergeant, when Bruce Lockyer spoke to me about Joyce Condon, it sounded as though he—hated her, not as though they were working together."

"Thieves can fall out," Redding growled. "Also, they can get together again. Judging by what happened last night, it looks as though your Ellen Carey and Bruce Lockyer have patched up their differences and don't hate each other any longer."

Merle said, "Isn't it possible there may be some other explanation? I find it so hard to believe those things are true, that Ellen is a thief, or that she hurt Doro. Ellen was quiet and hardworking and kind to everybody, especially to—to me."

"I once knew another woman who was also quiet and kind,"

Redding said. "She embezzled half a million dollars from a firm which trusted her, then shot a policeman while trying to escape, when her thefts were discovered."

"I still can't believe Ellen is—is involved in what is happening here," Merle said stubbornly. "And I can't believe it of Bruce Lockyer, either! I don't know why he is looking for Joyce Condon, but I feel it doesn't have anything to do with stealing drugs."

Redding studied her, looking now both angry and baffled. Then his features seemed to soften, just a little. "You are very young," he said. "Perhaps you think and act too impulsively, from your heart instead of from your head. I'm not yet quite sure about that. All I do know is that you have complicated my job, contributed a new tangle to an already muddled case, and now I must go out and start looking for a woman who calls herself Ellen Carey."

"How could she be anybody other than Ellen Carey?" Merle asked. "There are her employment records, and also her fingerprints—"

"I know. Those employment records will be checked, thoroughly. As for her fingerprints, they were only run through our local files, which showed only that somebody named Ellen Carey had never been in trouble in this city. Neither had anybody named Bruce Lockyer, from the run we made on the prints lifted from that glass paperweight. Somebody else does have a record, though, and it may turn out that the record fits Ellen Carey—"

He caught himself, then hurried on, "Miss Asquith, is there anything else you are still withholding, such as additional information about how you happened to be at the parking lot last night? The reason why you took your walk along High Street is a little obscure."

"I was just walking, because I was angry with Dr. Jablonski," Merle replied, and went on to tell the reason for that anger, how upset she had been because Mike had used his rest time to search through newspaper files.

From Sergeant Redding's expression, he did not quite believe her. However, he said, "Very well," and he turned abruptly to go.

Merle spoke quickly, "Sergeant, the record you have found—is it the record of Joyce Condon?"

He hesitated. For a second she thought he would not give her a reply. But, "Yes. We don't have all the details yet," Redding growled, "and we are waiting for further information from the east. But we know there is a Joyce Condon, and she has a record. A criminal record."

Only moments later, with Merle still in the lobby, trying to sort out her confused thoughts, Mike Jablonski walked in.

He moved to a divan, sat down, stretched out his legs and exhaled wearily. "Well, it's over, as of only a few minutes ago," Mike said.

Merle sat down beside him. "I tried to get in touch with you at noon, to wish you luck."

"Thanks for the wish, Merle," he sighed. "Thanks a lot."

He sat in a slumped position, chin almost on chest, hands shoved into trousers pockets. And Mike continued, "I couldn't sleep, this morning, too much on my mind, so until past noon I was locked in a storage room at Shangri La, the only place where I could find any privacy, doing some hard boning up on various things—the anatomy of the brain, for instance—" and he smiled tightly at this reference to the Jane Doe operation. "I'm glad I did. I think it helped."

"Was it all—very hard?" Merle asked.

He nodded. "There were a lot of questions to test my knowledge, first. Then there were questions about my attitude toward medicine, what I hope to accomplish in it, and also hypothetical questions about what I would do if confronted by various situations. I think I scored well with my answers, but maybe not quite well enough. There were a lot of applicants, all very good; I found myself wishing I could have had just six months more of internship, to work a little more, learn just a little more. Maybe I'll make it. I just don't know."

"You are very good too, Mike; you'll make it!" Merle said.

"Thanks again. I'll soon be finding out if you're right."

"How soon?" she asked.

"They said the appointments will be announced tomorrow or the next day," Mike replied.

He exhaled again and shook himself, sitting up. "I'll have to be running along, since I must be back on duty at 100 at six," Mike stated.

"Oh, no!" Merle protested. "There are plenty of other interns; can't one of them sub for you tonight, so you can get some sleep?"

"Perhaps so, but I'll take the duty. It's what I accepted when I came to City General and I'll see it through, without asking for favors, until the end. That will be three days from now, incidentally, if I'm not selected. All of those not chosen for residencies here must clear out of Shangri La then, since the new crop of interns will be moving in."

Merle felt a sinking sensation at the thought he might have to leave.

Mike started to rise, but hesitated. "I almost forgot—stopped by at 100 for a moment and Jonesy sent you something; she

said you left an order about looking for an item that was lost—"

He took an envelope from his jacket pocket and shook out what it contained. Merle exclaimed, "Ellen's locket!"

It was a small locket, on a thin chain. Merle told Mike about it. She told what Doro had revealed to her, about her call to Ellen's rooming house and about Sergeant Redding's visit.

Mike examined the locket, while listening. When she was finished, he seemed to have no comment to make. Instead, Mike said, "I think this thing opens up, but my nails are too short—"

He had surgeon's nails, cut to the quick. Merle snapped it open. They discovered it held a miniature snapshot, the head of a man, someone handsome, dark-haired, debonairly smiling. Merle said, "This man isn't Bruce Lockyer. And Ellen wasn't lying to me; she did lose it!"

"Well, I don't know what to think now," Mike said. "Somehow, I simply can't believe, either, that Ellen did those things to Doro—but Redding may be right in all he told you. Ellen may be trying to disappear because she fears Doro recognized her . . . Now, I really must go."

As Doro had done with Carl Hardin, Merle walked with him to the door. There, belatedly, she recalled there had been another reason why she had gone to Ward 100 last night. Merle said, "Mike, about me and—and Phil Crown . . . Can we talk again, soon—?"

Mike looked at her, a yearning look for a second, mixed with deep sympathy. He reached for Merle's hand and held it lightly. And he shook his head, a gesture of finality.

As plainly as though he had spoken, Mike Jablonski was telling Merle Asquith there was nothing more to be said, nothing to be gained from further talk. He was reminding her of what he had said on the terrace: He was powerless to break the hold of Phil Crown on her, and only she could do that.

Mike relinquished Merle's hand and left her. She watched him go, head down for a moment, shoulders rounded. But then she saw his back stiffen, saw his head lift. Whatever was to come, Mike would face it with courage and fortitude.

Merle felt her own back stiffen. "All right, Mike," she whispered. "I will go to Phil."

She would do it at once, tomorrow.

XI

On the morning of this day off which Mrs. Mollison had granted her, Merle slept late and did not rise until past ten. However, glancing into Doro's room before taking her shower, she saw the other nurse was still asleep, smiling as she slept but then suddenly clutching for a moment at her pillow, with a frightened grimace and a moan. She was probably caught for a moment in a bad dream which was again taking her through the frightening experience of two nights ago, Merle thought.

Moving about quietly, Merle dressed and left. She wore the only dress she had for use on fairly formal occasions, though it was not a formal as such—basic black, with long sleeves and a slightly flared skirt, also a slightly low but still modest neckline. Additionally, she wore gloves but no hat.

Not until she was driving away from the hospital did she remember that the dress had been bought during her affair with Phil Crown, that she had worn it when on dates with him.

Merle told herself determinedly not to let this affect her. She whispered, "You were young and foolish then. You've done some growing up since that time—or, if you haven't, it isn't ever going to happen. And stop talking to yourself!"

Stopping at a beauty parlor, she had her hair washed and set, something it needed. Then, with the time now well past noon, another bright, clear day, a warm wind whipping the city's streets, she stopped again, at a restaurant, picked at random, and ordered a cup of coffee, but barely sipped it, sitting by a window, watching a thick flow of traffic, until Merle realized she was putting off what must be done.

She drove on, nearly a dozen miles across the city, and came to the Robillet Foundation Hospital, a handsome new six-story building of very advanced design, set in its own gem-like small park.

Everything about the place spoke of money and a great deal of it. Walking in at a lobby whose walls were decorated with modernistic mosaic murals, Merle spoke to a receptionist, who murmured into a phone and then told her in carefully modulated tones, "Dr. Crown is presently engaged in a consultation and cannot be disturbed. If you can wait for a few moments, please—?"

There was a steady movement of women through the lobby,

sleekly elegant women in expensive dresses, furs, discreetly displayed jewelry, with tinkling laughter and exclamatory gusts of talk. Mike had called the place a plush rest home; Merle remembered that talk among City General's nurses at their night gossip sessions had said it catered almost exclusively to wealthy women.

And a post in such a place was what Phil Crown had wanted. His ambition had been realized. He was here.

He also had a wife whose father was on this hospital's board of directors.

Merle sat at a tiger-striped divan, waiting.

She felt that she knew well enough what Mike Jablonski had had in mind, asking her to come here. Mike was hoping in a sense for shock therapy, that she would see Phil clearly for what he was, recognize in him the qualities of calculation and self-centered ego, which—used to gain his own ends—had hurt her so much when she had been cast aside. And, Merle thought, Mike was probably also thinking that, with full recognition of them, she could at last shake him off, shake off the memory of the disastrous affair.

But, Merle told herself, she already knew what Phil was. She was afraid things were not going to work out at all as Mike hoped; rather, she began to fear something else might happen.

Then Merle had another thought, wondering in surprise why it had not occurred to her before as she remembered her last previous time with Phil, those dragging months ago—the final time she would ever see him, Merle had thought then; she remembered the bitter words with which she had lashed Phil Crown after he had told her everything between them was at an end.

Perhaps he was remembering very well also, and would refuse to see her.

But she was wrong, for he suddenly appeared, at the far side of the lobby. He paused, a consciously theatrical gesture that she had seen him do many times. A warm, pleased smile lighted his features. He came on, across a wide expanse of deep-piled rose and cream carpeting, moving to her at a quick, springy step.

Merle's heart began to thud, a dull, heavy beat in her breast.

She stood up, feeling again the shakiness in her knees. Phil Crown's hands reached out. He took both of her hands in his, holding them gently. "Merle, darling, this is completely wonderful!" Phil Crown breathed.

He was slight of stature and not very tall. His crisp brown hair, worn short but not obviously so, was brushed with care-

ful neatness. He had a small mustache, meticulously trimmed; Phil was attentive to small details. His smooth, unlined features were well tanned. There was a youthful quality in him which he would probably always retain.

Merle heard herself say, "Phil, you look very well."

"You look marvelous," Phil Crown said. "But aren't you a little thin?"

They sat down at the divan. Merle told him the reason for her thinness, the necessity of having to work as acting head nurse at Ward 100 because of Mrs. Boswell's illness.

Phil snorted indignantly. "That whole City General set-up is an unending rat race, never enough people to handle all of the duties properly, pressure every moment, low pay and few thanks. We do things much better here. Our staff count in relation to our normal patient load is the highest in the city. The pay scale is the highest, too."

He relaxed, looking about with pleasure. "This is hospital work as it should be, every facility one needs, no pressure; my hours are eight to five, with Wednesdays off to play golf, and I am on week-end call only every fourth week."

"It sounds very nice," Merle said, thinking of the operation schedule at City General, all surgeries filled and busy beginning at six every morning of the week and even a surgeon of Dr. Voss's standing had little free time. She added, "This is what you wanted, Phil. I am glad things have worked out for you."

Merle was finding it a physical effort to speak, and her words seemed to echo with a hollow sound.

Memories were rushing back in a flood tide, memories of the number of times she had been in this man's arms, of his kisses—and memories also, squeezing and twisting her inwardly, of how much of herself she had given to him in the conviction their love was real and for always.

His hands had touched her again now, and the reaction to this had sent alternating currents of both heat and cold that were still shivering through her body. He had relinquished her hands as they sat down, but he took one and pressed it briefly again while looking deep into her eyes. "Thanks for saying that, Merle," Phil murmured. "As always, you are very kind. It is a quality which I recognized instantly the moment we met. I don't have much kindness of my own and deeply regret that; I hoped I might borrow some from you. I am so sorry things did not work out for us as I had hoped they would; you will never know how sorry I have been, every moment since—since the time when I had to say good-bye to you."

It was beginning again, Merle realized, the smooth, gentle flow of his voice, words spoken which seemed to put her in a near-hypnotic haze. He was a man of great charm; he knew

this quite well, and had practiced being charming for so long it had become second nature and effortless. Phil Crown could use words to evoke any mood which was needed to serve his purpose—in this instance, sad regret for a love affair which he had not intended to pursue and which he had ended with casual ruthlessness.

"You know I had to say good-bye." Phil continued. "You know there was no hope in trying to go on—that it would have meant only unhappiness for both of us if I could not gain the goals I wanted—."

It was happening again, and, even though she knew him so well, knew the tricks he was employing and could even anticipate what was coming next, Merle found herself helpless to break the spell he was weaving about her. The pull of his beguiling personality was too strong. God help her, Merle thought desperately; she could not stop him herself.

"As it developed, I am unhappy anyway," Phil sighed. "Aside from my work, I have very little. I am lonely, Merle. I live a life of almost complete boredom. Because—it is painful to admit this, but I must—the marriage I accepted was a mistake—"

He had not accepted the marriage but had worked hard to bring it about, and had admitted as much to Merle at the time of their parting.

Phil went on talking. They sat near the wide sweep of a picture window, as people came and went about them. Phil was near her, but not near enough to occasion comment—only a doctor and patient conferring together, those others must be thinking, and, Merle thought, the strain in her posture and features must make it seem she was ill.

A parking lot was nearby, beyond the window, with spaces, occupied by expensive cars, that were reserved for doctors. Merle wondered which of those cars belonged to Phil. Then she saw a sign with his name on it, at a space which held a bright red sports car, low and racy.

His professional jacket was of soft creamy linen. He was wearing cuff-links of heavy crusted gold. Merle also noticed a new wrist watch—platinum, from the pale glint of its metal. His marriage might have been a mistake, but it had rewarded him handsomely.

Phil was telling her that he and his wife had little in common, and that living with her had become something of an ordeal. She was older than he—quite a bit older, Phil intimated—and had been married previously. He had tried hard to make a go of things and she seemed to be reasonably happy, but he was not. "I can't bring myself even to think of divorce, though. It would be too cruel, since she had to go

through with that once before, suffered an emotional breakdown as a result and has an emotional trauma about failure in marriage. I will go on. I will do my best to make it work," Phil said, looking away from Merle, his voice troubled but resolute.

There was an obvious fact which might be pointed out to him, Merle thought, that he had to go on, since his position here and all he hoped to achieve in the future no doubt would be lost if his marriage ended. Instead, Merle said, "I am sorry you have had such a disappointment, Phil."

She could seem to speak only banalities to him, instead of saying the words crowding almost tumultuously in her, that she knew exactly what he was doing and why, knew every trick of intonation, gesture and expression he was using and that this time she was not going to accept them.

"You are so understanding," Phil Crown murmured.

Still looking away from her, he let a brief silence settle between them before continuing, "Life is so damned complex. It all seemed easy when I was in med school, and even later at City General. I knew what I wanted and felt I could get it, without much trouble. But it wasn't simple, and nothing worked out quite the way I planned. Oh, I have the residency here. Within two years, I will be in private practice, and that ought to be quite profitable—"

It probably would be a practice limited only by the number of patients—women patients—he would be physically able to accept, Merle thought.

"But I've had to pay a high price, and I'll have to keep on paying," Phil said.

What price would Mike Jablonski have to pay—in crushing disappointment, a sense of not being good enough, a haunting sense of failure—if he did not get his residency? Merle tried to concentrate on this, and could not, for Phil was looking at her again, his smile warm and pleased and intimate.

"For you to come here is the kindest thing you have ever done," Phil Crown said. "I wanted to see you again, Merle, wanted it desperately, or only to hear the sound of your voice, but fear held me back—fear that you would turn me away."

What could she possibly say if he asked now why she had come to him today? Then Merle discovered Phil was accepting her visit as something which required no explanation, that memory of the past had driven her to him again, for he was hurrying on, telling of a move he had made to relieve his marriage's boredom.

He had taken a small apartment near this hospital. "A pleasant little place where I can relax now and then," Phil said. "It is quite charming; I haven't had it long, haven't

invited anybody else there yet, certainly no other woman . . . Merle, give me more of your kindness, to make up for all that has gone wrong for me. Come to see me there; say you will!"

So here it was, the result of her visit, a demanding invitation to involve herself once more in the affair with Phil Crown.

His hand touched hers once more, claiming it, holding it, with urgent pressure. "How can this be wrong, after what we meant to each other?" Phil breathed. "And something may happen—there is always hope—to make all that is between us . . . permanent."

Merle sought desperately for some way to counter this argument. Nothing came to her. All she could say was, "Phil, I must—think—"

"Of course, darling." He had a skilled sense of timing, of knowing when he had said exactly enough.

Phil glanced to his watch, frowning. "I have another consultation at three," he muttered. "Merle, we both work days, and our evenings are free. Come to me soon—any time! All you have to do is call and let me know—"

Merle noticed his lips were moist, and she also noticed a moist shine in his eyes. He was feeling a surging eagerness of anticipation, and she shivered responsively. It did no good to attempt to withhold this reaction.

"I wish I could kiss you," Phil Crown said. "Don't make me wait for the moment when I can do that again. Don't make me wait—!"

She left, and drove at random, almost blindly, continuing westward in the city, presently turning aside into a hilly area. Merle noticed a small park, deserted at this hour of a week day. She got out and walked on winter-seared grass. A thick fog bank was drifting in, and the day's warmth was gone.

Merle fought a silent battle with herself. Early dusk found her still fighting it.

To tell herself again that she was young, that time would eventually gloss over the memory of Phil Crown and bring her peace, no longer held any measure of comfort or hope. It had not happened so far. She did not think it was going to happen. And she did not feel young, this darkening afternoon, but old, with a new-found wisdom of herself, and of life, the knowledge that perverse longing might drive her to Phil again, no matter how she attempted to evade such a surrender.

Mike Jablonski had envisioned such a possibility. He had said she might have to return to Phil, on any terms he chose to impose, or else risk a crack-up. Merle told herself Mike

had been right in saying she must see the man. Certainly, she could not have gone on much longer in the torment of hopeless, frustrated desire. But Mike had hoped she would see Phil for what he was, with strength to excise him from her life, and in that, Merle feared, Mike had been wrong.

She saw Phil Crown clearly enough, but it did not seem to matter, Merle had felt the dominant pull of his personality again. She could foresee it would probably draw her to him again. Merle could not think of any way to break the spell that had been renewed this day.

Mike could not break it. He had recognized this. She thought of Mike with a sudden deep surge of longing which seemed to mock her. Longing for Mike had come too late, Merle thought wearily, and he must be told this, that his cause was hopeless and he must not be further involved. Mike must be told to forget her.

She returned to her car and drove again, through a cold, misty night, with a drizzle beginning to dampen the streets. She stopped in another restaurant for dinner, but picked at her food and sat for long moments with hands motionless, still thinking of today and what was yet to be.

One result of her encounter with Phil was that she felt a new, razor-edged awareness of what it meant to be a woman, vessel for the containment of almost boundless love but with so little in the way of strength granted her to determine into whose hands it should be given.

Must every woman face at some time the dilemma now confronting her, tempted and harried and driven, quite aware of what she should do and yet so helpless, because of what she was, to do it—?

Merle supposed this was probably true. Then she realized that she was dawdling again, putting off the moment when she must face Mike. She returned to City General. It was past nine when she veered in at the staff parking lot, deserted tonight, no prowler lurking in shadows and watching Ward 100. Merle crossed the street, saw the ramp was deserted and went into the Nursing Station, where Jonesy, at the desk, was struggling with paper work.

Jonesy, blinking at her, reported that Mike was not there, not on duty. "He came on," she said. "But then they took him away. I called the Chief Resident's office and they said there would be a replacement but one hasn't shown up yet. I was about to call and remind them that the ward isn't being covered, though thankfully it's quiet tonight—"

"Jonesy, what are you talking about?" Merle interrupted. "Who took Dr. Jablonski away?"

"Why, the police," Jonesy replied. "It happened about an

hour ago. That Sergeant Redding and another policeman showed up. They talked to Dr. Jablonski for a couple of minutes. Then Sergeant Redding came and told me Dr. Jablonski was going with them, that the Chief Resident had been notified. After that, they left."

Jonesy paused, nibbling at her lip. "I don't think Dr. Jablonski wanted to go with them," she said. "I think maybe he's under arrest."

XII

It was jarring to be shaken out of concentration on her own personal problems, to be thrust again into the mystifying tangle of events at City General. Merle paced the ramp, waiting, worrying about Mike, hoping he would return.

An intern showed up—Dr. Cohill, to stare at her in surprise. "What in the world are you doing here?" he asked.

Merle wondered if talk was beginning in the hospital about her appearance at Ward 100 during these late hours.

She went to a phone and called Mike's room at Shangri La. There was no answer. No one came this time to lift the receiver. Then she dialed the police number, but was told that Sergeant Redding was busy and could not talk to her.

Merle waited until a relief nurse came to take over from Jonesy; Cece Hanes was still off duty. The relief was new to Emergency Admitting, and the change-over was made with some difficulty and a lengthy discussion of reports. Jonesy left. The new nurse watched Merle questioningly, and Merle realized she could not wait here any longer. A nurse without duty on a ward was in the way. As a matter of professional courtesy, she must go.

She decided to leave her car at the lot from the time being. Merle headed through the main building and down the steps toward the nurses' home, carrying with her the burden of worry about Mike. She was on the walk bordering the circular drive, near the spot where Mike had first kissed her, also near shrubbery massed about several trees, when someone stirred in thick shadows there. A harried voice whispered, "Miss Asquith!"

It was Bruce Lockyer. He went on talking quickly, before she could speak, telling that everything had constantly become more precarious for him, with the searches of the building's sub-levels; he had been watching for her by night, hoping for another meeting, wanting to talk to her again—

Merle interrupted him, "A nurse was attacked and beaten at the High Street parking lot last night. You are being suspected—"

"No!" Bruce Lockyer said forcefully. "I heard talk about that, but I didn't do it. I don't know why she was assaulted. I was waiting here last night, hoping you would come along. And you did, but a man was with you."

He had seen her escort, one of Redding's men. Merle said, "Tell me why you are hunting for Joyce Condon!"

Perhaps it would all be cleared up, if he would only speak. She saw Lockyer shift position, taking a step toward her. He muttered, "Why? To deal out simple justice for what that woman did. She got off too easy before. I've got to find her, before I'm caught; I've got to—!"

There was a note of savagery in his voice again. Merle said, "What did she do to you?"

"She ruined my life," Lockyer said with stark bitterness.

And then he was running, as a sudden fast pounding of footsteps began, someone running toward them from the steps. It was a man, who stopped beside Merle. "I am a police officer. Was that Lockyer?"

He was the short, heavy-set man, assigned to watch her. Merle answered, "Yes. I think he went around the corner—"

"Go to your room," the policeman said. "Stay there!"

He ran after Lockyer. Merle wondered if the man had been trailing her all day. It did not seem to matter. Nothing mattered, except that in another moment Lockyer might have given the answer—who Joyce Condon was and the reason for his bitter efforts to find her.

Merle went inside and up to the fourth floor; she glanced into Doro's room and discovered it was empty.

This added to her worries. Where could Doro, still shaken by her mauling, be at this hour?

Merle waited for a while, thinking there might be a summons from the police. But nothing happened. Toward one o'clock she undressed, put on her nightgown and got into bed, there to lie awake, all of her nerves feeling pulled to a breaking point, listening for Doro to return but hearing no sound, hearing nothing at all until at nearly one-thirty there was a sudden light tap at her door.

She went to open it. Then Merle stumbled back, her heart faltering, in her a sense of astonishment and dismay greater than any she had ever known. For the one revealed to her, by dim corridor light, was Mike Jablonski.

He came in quickly, closed the door and leaned against it. She whispered wretchedly, "No—!"

For him to be here could mean ruin for both of them—this late hour, herself in a thin nightgown— But the thought of such a disaster was submerged by something else. Merle had seen his face, tortured lines in his cheeks, the skin drawn tight, something close to sickness in his eyes. She whispered, "Mike, you're ill!"

This could explain it, that he had been driven too much, too hard, and was not accountable for what he was doing.

It seemed, oddly, as though he had expected her to say something else. Mike muttered, "No. If I seem that way, it is because I was terribly afraid I might not find you here. Merle, you must get dressed, fast, and come with me."

He moved past her, with a brush of his fingers against her arm. There seemed to be infinite longing in this brief contact. Mike went to a window and looked out, his back turned to her. "Something may be going to happen soon that will clear everything up," he said. "And I want you on hand, with me, when it happens, so there can be no question concerning your whereabouts and actions. Please hurry."

She began to grope about, fumbling for underthings and stockings and putting them on.

Mike went on talking. He snorted at Jonesy's thought he might have been arrested. "Though it could have happened, if I hadn't agreed to go with them," he said. "They wanted to question me—about you."

"Me—!"

"Yes. I'm afraid you have become a suspect, Merle. I don't understand all of the reasons why—they didn't choose to confide in me—but one reason is that you were at the parking lot when Doro was beaten. They found a jagged rock which might have been used to slug her. By a woman, Doro said . . . and they think it may have been you, in spite of Doro's statement."

Hot indignation flared in Merle. "But what reason do they think I could possibly have had for doing such a thing—?"

She caught herself, with realization Sergeant Redding had probably decided on a reason, her contacts with Bruce Lockyer. The fact she had met the man again would no doubt make Redding even more suspicious.

"I asked them that question," Mike said. "They didn't answer."

She found the dress she had worn today, and pulled it on again. Merle felt frowsy and rumpled; she would have liked to do something about her face and hair, but a light was not to be risked. "I'm ready," Merle said. And, "Where are we going—?"

"You'll see," he replied, turning and coming to her. "I said that I thought there might be a way to catch that thief. I suggested it tonight, a trap to catch him. Redding didn't comment, but I have a strong hunch it is going to be tried, with no delay. And we are going to be on hand when it happens."

So there would be no question about where she was and what she was doing, Mike had told her—and also that he had been terribly afraid he would not find her in her room at this time, when the police might be setting their trap.

Did this mean that Mike, also, suspected her?

He said, "Let me have your shoes. I'll carry them until we are in the open. We'll go down the back stairs and out the rear door."

This explained how he had entered the nurses' home. And Mike went on, "I used a scalpel, to force the rear door lock."

He had risked his professional career, doing that. Nothing could have saved him, if he had been caught. And he was still in danger of discovery. So, for that matter, was Merle Asquith.

They hurried down the back stairs, with a dim light burning at each landing, breath faltering in Merle's throat at the thought someone might see them. Not until they were through the rear door and in the open, with Merle putting on her shoes, Mike's hand to her arm to steady her, did fear begin to ebb a little.

Then they went around the nurses' home, onto the walk in front of it, along that toward the steps leading up to the main building, but past those steps. Mike's hand was still on Merle's arm. He was striding fast, and she almost had to run to keep up with him.

Merle tried to say something more, to assure Mike that Redding's suspicions of her were completely unfounded. But she was soon breathless again, from the fast pace, and Mike did not seem inclined to talk at all. They came to the wide steps at the front of the main building, and went up them. But Mike slanted across those steps, around the north corner onto the terrace, and Merle realized their destination was Ward 100.

Light at the front of the main building had disclosed his features to her again—tightness, strain, and the look in his eyes; Merle feared again there was illness in Mike Jablonski.

Looking ahead, he slowed down for a moment. "Damn!" Mike said. "I'm afraid we're too late."

A police car was partially visible at the ambulance drive.

"But," he continued, hurrying again, "there will be no question this time about you being involved. I'll swear to where you were, if it costs me my license to practice!"

"You'll do no such thing!" Merle gasped. "Mike, go to your room, please; let me talk to Sergeant Redding—"

"Hush," he told her.

They entered on the men's side, went on to the Nursing Station, stepping through the swinging doors to view a strange and totally unexpected sight—Jonesy, huddled in a chair in the middle of the room, hands writhing in her lap, tears flowing down plump cheeks, crying, "But I only came back because I was afraid my ward count report was wrong; I wanted to

check it again. I didn't have anything to do with what happened—!"

Merle glanced to the narcotics cabinet. It was closed and locked.

Sergeant Redding, who was frowningly studying Jonesy, sent a furious look at Mike Jablonski. "You were returned to your room. You were told to stay there!" he snapped.

"Right. But I didn't," Mike replied.

Listening, Merle pieced together what had happened.

The trap suggested by Mike had been set. The relief head nurse and the intern, Dr. Cohill, had been moved out of the way. Arrangements had been made to shunt ambulances to another hospital for a while. The Nursing Station at Ward 100 had been left empty, apparently uncovered, a tempting target for the narcotics thief—or thieves, with Redding and three other policemen watching it.

But the trap had caught only Jonesy.

Merle listened to Jonesy's tearful statement that she had returned to the hospital because of worry about her ward count report. Leaving her car at the parking lot, she had approached along the empty ambulance drive, puzzled by the quiet, the lack of anyone at the Nursing Station. She had paused on the ramp, looking about, then had started inside. As she did so, all of the lights at the ambulance drive and in the Nursing Station had suddenly winked out.

Jonesy, sensing she was not alone in this place, had cried out in fright. She had tried to run, to escape, had slammed into a desk, then had collided with someone and had been knocked flat. She had heard footsteps running from her, but did not know where they had gone.

Redding, coming in from the ramp with a flashlight, had stopped Jonesy as she tried again to run. His men, coming from their posts had reported that nobody had gotten by them. It had taken several moments for the ward's switches, located in an alcove near the men's side, to be found, for the lights to be turned on.

It was plain that Jonesy was now under suspicion, also.

Merle felt indignation again, at this. "She is telling you the truth about her ward count reports!" Merle said to Redding. "Jonesy had been having trouble trying to make them out properly!"

"She seems to have been having an unusual amount of trouble—at unusual times," Redding replied, and Merle realized he was thinking of night before last, and the assault on Doro. It had seemed then Jonesy had gone home, but she had not done so; tonight she had suddenly returned, at a

very inopportune moment and with what sounded to the police like a very strange reason for her return.

Merle tried another tack. "There must have been somebody else here tonight! And with a dozen ways to get into the main building from this ward—or away from the hospital—why aren't you trying to find him—?"

"Somebody who would know those ways to escape—who would be familiar with this ward from having been here or from having been told all about it—?" Redding asked.

This was obvious. Only a person familiar with the ward would know the location of its light switches.

Jonesy, of course, knew quite well where they were. But Merle still felt convinced there had been someone else here, that Jonesy had blundered into him by accident, and he had fled, getting away.

Bruce Lockyer—?

Redding took Mike Jablonski a little to one side and talked to him for a moment. Their voices were pitched low, but Merle heard most of what was said.

From Mike: "At one-thirty, Miss Asquith was with me."

"Ah?" Redding said. "And where was that, Doctor?"

"Not here, obviously," Mike replied. "If a statement as to her whereabout is necessary, I'll make it, under oath. Is such a statement necessary?"

Redding chewed at his lip. "Not yet," he decided.

The Nursing Station was becoming somewhat crowded with people. The nurse who had relieved Jonesy appeared; Merle gathered she had been waiting on the women's side, and the nurse informed Redding no one had come in there—so if somebody else, other than Jonesy, had invaded the Nursing Station and had turned off the lights, escape had not been attempted in that direction.

The nurse went on to tell how she had relieved Jonesy, adding in reply to a direct question that Merle Asquith had been on hand at the time.

Dr. Cohill was back. The night chief resident, in charge of all interns on night services, also came in, to speak to Mike, "You have been taken off the duty list, Dr. Jablonski, with no further assignments. I suppose you understand—?"

"Yes," Mike replied.

"I'm sorry," the night resident told him.

Merle supposed, drearily, that Mike was being removed from duty because of involvement with her. Before she could protest, however, the night superintendent of nurses came in. Redding wanted a check of the ward count report that Jonesy had signed and left with the relief head nurse, and the superintendent asked Merle to help.

The report was found to be quite accurate.

Redding said then, "Mrs. Jones, I must send you along to police headquarters."

"Oh, no—!" Merle began.

"Miss Asquith, I now have some questions for you," Redding told her, a sudden bite in his voice. "Please sit down."

She was required to take the chair Jonesy had used. The Nursing Station was emptying again. Jonesy was being led away. The night chief resident and night superintendent were gone, Dr. Cohill was on the ramp with the relief nurse, checking in a patient; normal services was being resumed on Ward 100. Only Merle, Sergeant Redding and Mike Jablonski were here, as Redding's questioning began.

He wanted first to know about her encounter with Lockyer tonight, all about it. Then the sergeant was taking her back to their other meetings, with hard, demanding questions. Merle soon became confused. She began to feel almost unbearably tired.

Mike was listening, the skin drawn even tighter over his cheekbones. It was, Merle realized, the first time for him to know of those meetings—and why hadn't she told him about them? Why—?

Redding went back to the first encounter, when Merle had seen Lockyer at the stairway in the main corridor, just prior to her meeting with Mike and Ellen Carey at the staff dining room. Later, following Lockyer's assault of the two men in this Nursing Station, she had reported that she had seen him again. Where, Redding demanded, had she seen him? How had it happened?

Merle was forced to the admission that she had gone down to the first sub-level, looking for him. Perhaps this admission was relevant now, she thought; perhaps it might help in ending the nightmare of all that was happening.

"I had a hunch," she told Redding. "It was the only reason why I went down there—"

The policeman snorted. "You must think we are very naive to believe that, Miss Asquith," he said.

Merle started. What he was thinking was glaringly obvious —that she had known Lockyer was there, knowledge which came from the fact there was some link of intimacy between her and the man . . . and further, that she had been helping him, all along.

"No!" Merle cried. "No! No! No! I didn't know he was there. I felt sorry for him, yes. I told him to turn himself in. That was all. There was nothing else—!"

Her voice trailed off. She saw a look on Mike's face now of almost pure torture. Merle felt an acute sickness, a dazed

sense of what Mike must be thinking, that he had become involved with a flagrant chit of a girl to whom he had offered his love, his life, with the shadows of two men, instead of one, between them all the while.

Mike said, speaking as though with great effort, "Sergeant, I'll still swear she was with me tonight and couldn't have been involved in what happened here."

He walked away, out into the night, footsteps dragging, head down.

Merle breathed, "Please, Mike—!" But he did not stop, or look around.

Strangely, Redding let her go, a few minutes later, sending Merle along with an escort again. At a little before three in the drizzly black dawn the nurses' home housekeeper came, in answer to the ringing of a night bell, and let her in. Merle went up to the fourth floor, there to find Doro's room still empty.

Should she have spoken of this to Redding? Merle did not know. She was at a point of not knowing for sure what she should do about anything. It took great effort to undress and get into bed again, then to pull herself out following an hour or so of dream-haunted sleep when the alarm clock sounded at five-thirty.

Merle felt infinitely worn and tired. The sense of being feverish was in her anew as she trudged to the main building. There, a comment overheard in the corridor sent her flying to a bulletin board outside of the administration office, where a notice had been posted, according to the talk, late yesterday afternoon.

She scanned the list hurriedly, then again, and a third time, looking in vain for something which was not there, understanding now Mike's attitude when he had come to her room, feeling heartsick as she thought of the demons of despair that must have been clawing at him, of the fact there had been no word of comfort from her.

These were the names of those selected for residency appointments, and his name was not among them. Mike had failed. He was through at City General and must be gone by tomorrow. Perhaps he had already left.

XIII

Merle understood many things now. Mike had known early yesterday evening that the appointment he wanted so much had been denied him, but he had reported for duty at Ward 100, intent on carrying out his obligations to the end. Then had come the moment when he had risked so much to help her. And later he had been informed that because of his failure to win the appointment, he was finished as an intern; his work at City General had come to an end.

It added to the anguish of the fact he had walked away from her, head down. Mike must have felt then that everything he wanted so much lay in crashing ruin about him and that nothing remained but to leave and attempt alone, somewhere, to put his life together again.

Merle went to the dining room. She was trying to force herself to eat breakfast when Doro came in and sat down at her table. Merle stared at her. Doro said, "Didn't you hear about me? I had a fainting spell yesterday afternoon and they put me to bed for the night at 8500."

Merle was wearily glad that Doro could not possibly have been involved in last night's events. And the blonde nurse went on, "Poor Carl; they called him, and he came to see me, quite upset. He wants me to leave this place, right away. I suppose I will, though for the first time I'm beginning to have a feeling for it."

Merle thought of those final words, as she went to check in at Ward 100. She had always had a strong feeling herself for City General—and so, in all likelihood, had Mike. It was probably tearing at him cruelly that he must leave.

On the ward, she found a relief nurse was taking over her job. Merle called the superintendent's office, where a clerk said, "You have been removed from the duty roster, Miss Asquith. I'm sorry you weren't advised earlier. And I'm afraid I have no further information."

Perhaps it was the beginning of the end for her at City General also. Merle returned to her room. The day was dark and dismal and it was beginning to rain.

She had a call almost immediately, someone speaking for Sergeant Redding. "You are to stay at the hospital, and not try to leave," Merle was told. "You will be wanted for questioning, later."

Questioning . . . more of the pressure, probably, to make her admit what was not true. She then dialed Mike's number. There was an immediate answer, from someone who identified himself as a new spring appointment intern. "Jablonski? I suppose he was the guy who had this room before me," the intern said. "I'm just moving in, found it empty when I got here."

So apparently Mike was gone and there was nothing to do now but to pace the floor and take aspirin for a thudding headache and to rub her tired eyes, as rain pitter-pattered against her window in a constant downpour, as thoughts came and went in chaotic, nebulous waves, with seemingly no help for her anywhere.

Life had once been so simple for her, also. There had been work which she liked, and a sense of accomplishment in doing it. There had been occasional parties, dates, none of them very serious; Merle had told herself there was no hurry, with plenty of time for the right man to come along. But Phil Crown had come along instead, and Mike Jablonski and Bruce Lockyer. Now nothing was simple. Her life was an emotional shambles, so tangled and twisted that Merle felt it could never be set to rights again.

She dozed after a while and came awake, gasping, heart pounding violently, to discover no reason for this other than her dreams. The rain was falling. The time was only a little past noon. Then Merle slept again, heavily, not to awaken once more until past six.

A check of the hospital switchboard disclosed there had been no further calls for her, from Sergeant Redding or anybody else. Merle put on her rain cape and left her room; she had to get away for a while, even though she had nowhere to go. And she still wore her uniform, wrinkled from the fact she had slept in it, though this did not seem to matter.

Heading toward the steps up the slope in early blackness, Merle started as some heavy concussion seemed to shudder through the rain-heavy air. It sounded like a explosion, fairly close, and she paused, but heard nothing more. Merle went on, into the main building. Though she felt no desire for food, she had to eat.

And, after that—? The thought of further waiting, kept here by Sergeant Redding's order, was almost unbearable.

She was hardly inside the building when the P.A. loudspeakers began to crackle: "All off-duty personnel, report to Ward 100 at once! This is a disaster call. All off-duty personnel—!"

Merle began to run, instantly.

A disaster call required this: Forget everything else and

report at top speed. It was reserved for the most dire sort of emergency. Merle had never heard the call before, but she had taken part in several drills to prepare for the moment when it might come.

At the ward she found herself the first one to respond. Another relief nurse was on duty, in place of Jonesy. She was in a state of frightened anxiety. So was Dr. Cohill, working as Mike's replacement.

The disaster was a train accident. A two car commuter train, traveling at high speed, had gone off the wet rails only a mile or so away. "The first report said there may be up to eighty casualties," the other nurse said. "And I—I'm working this ward for the first time—"

Merle had seen those two car commuter units, with a diesel engine in the forward car, had seen them flash across the nearby intersection hurrying workers home to the city's far suburbs. She had a vivid mental image of what must be happening at the scene of the wreck, of what would soon be happening here.

Thank heaven for the food poisoning cases, she thought as she removed her rain cape and tossed it aside; they had given her guidance in what had to be done. "We must clear all beds at once, and use everybody who reports until that is done," she said. "Dr. Cohill, take charge of the ramp; you'll soon have plenty of help. We'll bring them in, upon arrival, as fast as possible."

Then—it was like diving into a whirlpool, which twisted and battered and spun her in all directions—Merle went to work.

Only bits and pieces of those early moments of the night were to remain with her afterward. Hospital personnel were pouring in and she was giving them orders, since somebody must. Both sides of the ward were being cleared, with an orderly tugging at her sleeve. "We don't have enough gurneys!"

"Carry them—three, four, five of you to a patient, as many as are needed; those beds must be emptied!" Merle directed.

Ambulance sirens were screaming and she was on the ramp, looking at the first arrivals, lips tightening at what she saw. A rain-sodden sheriff's deputy was saying, "These aren't necessarily the most badly injured. The cars are on their sides, badly smashed; we're bringing out those we can get at first—"

An ambulance driver was shouting, "Help me get unloaded! There are others lying in the mud and rain, waiting to be brought in!"

Harsh white light and rain and cries of pain—and Mike Jablonski running up the drive, wearing a dark suit, peeling off his coat, rolling up his sleeves. "Who's on duty here? Cohill?" he demanded. "I'll help him, then."

"Yes, Mike!" They looked at each other for a second before he turned away, plunging into his own whirlpool of furious activity.

She cried, "Everybody not working here get inside; the ramp and drive must be kept clear!" This time she was not going to let them become congested. Merle shoved at somebody to emphasize the command, then discovered it was Mrs. Mollison. She said, "I'm sorry—"

"Don't be," the superintendent of nurses replied. "And since you know this ward better than anybody else on hand, keep giving the orders. What can I do—?"

Merle was next inside at the control desk, scribbling admission tickets. Her mind was going at top speed, trying to anticipate and take care of everything. The operating rooms on nineteen were manned and waiting, and Emergency O.R. was already busy. Somebody told her all beds were now clear on both sides of the ward "—but they are beginning to fill up fast—"

"Start moving the lightly injured along also. And we need cots!" She stabbed her finger at people milling about, waiting to be assigned duties. "You, you and you—hustle to Central Supply and start bringing cots here. Place as many as you can on both sides of the ward. Then start putting them in the main corridor. Do it!"

Two orderlies and a social service clerk hurried obediently away. Merle's finger stabbed again, singling out others. "Blankets, bed-linen, towels, all you can lift and carry; bring them!"

Doro Speare was coming in, looking pale but resolute. "Don't tell me to leave; I have as much right as anyone else to help," Doro said. "What shall I do?"

"Handle this desk," Merle decided. "Try to keep track of admissions and drug tickets, Doro."

She rushed out into the rain again, grabbing at people, sending them to direct traffic at the street and on the drive, with orders to admit only ambulances. She heard Mike's voice, tight with strain but controlled, as he moved among the gurneys on the ramp, making his quick examinations. "Fractures, both legs, in this case, plus possible pelvic injuries . . ." He checked a second accident victim. "D.O.A. on this one—" Then, lifting a blanket for a check of a third victim, his features going bleak, "Multiple injuries— No, D.O.A. also. Confound it, we must move faster. We may be losing some of them because we're too slow—!"

All of it became a confused montage, scenes blending together, blurring; the rain slanted down, ambulances rushed up the drive, unloaded and departed, to return again. Merle's

uniform was now damp and clinging to her. It did not matter. Those laboring about the ramp were soaked to the skin.

A doctor, one of the senior members of the medical staff, confronted her. "We're running short of morphine, nembutol, seconal, everything," he reported.

The narcotics cabinet was unlocked and standing open. Merle called the pharmacy, which rushed along heavy additional supplies. She signed for them, and spoke to Doro, "Keep on trying to keep as close track as you can on what is taken out of here."

Doro was very pale, with her cheek discolorations vividly emphasized, but she nodded valiantly. "I'll watch it," she promised.

Mike came striding in. "I have a man with a bad basal skull fracture, depressed," he told Merle. "What is the situation at Emergency O.R.—?"

"They are working at top speed, but you may have to wait for several minutes before your patient can be admitted," she replied. "Can he go up to nineteen—?"

"Negative, I'm afraid. Since there are more than enough doctors on the ramp now, I'll move him on into Emergency and jerry-rig some sort of set-up so I can work on him myself."

Mike was at his strong best, Merle thought as he hurried away. He was all concentration, compassion and hard-driving skill.

Somebody put a sandwich and a cup of coffee in Merle's hand. She chewed and swallowed distractedly, without slackening her pace. And later there was a sudden startled outcry, a babbling of voices. She turned to the control desk, pushed through people gathering there, and saw Doro, motionless on the floor.

Merle knelt to check her pulse. It was fluttering. Doro, she thought, had fainted again. Merle said, "Move her to one of those cots on the women's side, and let her rest."

Several of the men who had gathered carried Doro away. Mrs. Mollison, appearing again, said, "I'll find someone to take over in her place."

Only moments after that, Merle saw Ellen Carey; like Doro, Ellen was wearing a dress instead of a uniform. She was walking beside a gurney, holding a bottle of plasma.

This, now, seemed wholly unreal. Ellen here . . . no.

But it was quite real. Ellen accompanied the gurney in at the women's side. Merle started after the woman, to encounter her as she came out again.

Ellen's features were pallid; her hair hung in damp strands. Lips moving jerkily, she said, "I heard about this on the radio,

and had to come, to—help. I meant to disappear, Merle. But I won't do that now. I'll tell you all about . . . myself."

Merle did not know what to say in response. Ellen moved on, out to the ramp, where she offered her assistance with another patient.

Had anyone else noticed her? Mike . . . but Mike was at Emergency O.R., and Doro was senseless on a cot.

Should Sergeant Redding be notified—?

There was sudden uproar on the drive. Merle saw a mass of people, surging from the street, pushing against those she had ordered to keep the drive clear. The sounds that came from them were high-pitched, anguished.

She ran down to that scene. Merle did not have to be told who these people were—relatives and friends of the injured, and all control of the situation could become lost if they broke through to the ramp.

Merle looked frantically around. She saw a policeman, in glistening raincoat and boots, and ran to him. He panted, "Sorry to be late in lending a hand; we were all ordered at first to report to the wreck. What can we do here?"

"Get these people back," Merle said. "Tell them to go around to the front and wait at the main lobby, that they will have news as soon as it can be furnished. Clear the street!"

She saw faces in the throng, and their expressions wrenched at her. She noticed a large panel truck across at the parking lot, a camera on its top, a man talking fast into a microphone, and she realized all of this was on TV.

Flash-bulbs were glittering. Men and women were grabbing at her arm, identifying themselves as reporters, with demanding questions. Merle shook them off. There was sudden weakness in her; she wanted desperately to sit down somewhere for a moment. But she had to get back. There was so much to be done.

Only a few minutes later, it seemed, the time was past ten and there was nothing more to do.

The ward had been filled, emptied, almost filled again, and now half of its beds were empty once more. There had been five admissions that had resulted from other accidents. Most of the volunteers were gone. Many of the cots had been returned to Central Supply.

It was quiet on the ramp. Merle went to take a look at the main corridor. A few patients were still waiting there to be moved upstairs. She saw Dr. Voss and Mike Jablonski, both in surgical caps and gowns, standing together, conferring. Then Mike strode away, back to Emergency Operating.

Dr. Voss looked after him, a heavy sadness in his features.

He spoke to Merle, "Are you thinking that we treated the boy badly, denying him the residency—?"

Boy . . . Mike was at least twenty-eight, she thought, and while he had displayed an exuberant youthful quality the first night she had known him, it seemed unlikely there was any boyishness left in Mike after all he had been through since then.

Merle asked, "Was he rejected because of his handling of the Jane Doe case, his—mis-naming of the artery during the operation?"

"Oh, no," Dr. Voss replied. "It was just that there were so few residencies and so many very good applicants. I voted strongly for Mike, and so did several others on the board. Unfortunately, it wasn't quite enough. So it seems we lose a highly competent surgeon—and Mike has been all of that, tonight."

"He didn't have to come here and help," Merle pointed out. "He could have stayed away. Somebody should thank him, at least."

"I did that," Dr. Voss sighed. "I should do more, but I can't seem to think of anything more."

He shuffled away. Merle returned to the Nursing Station, where Mrs. Mollison and a night supervisor who had taken Doro's place were finishing a check of all of the papers which had piled up. "I don't know whether we'll ever get the records completely straight." Mrs. Mollison said. "However—sixty-eight admissions, and caring for them was more important than keeping the paper work in exact order."

"We thought we had a good disaster plan," the superintendent of nurses continued, "but tonight showed it can be—must be—greatly improved."

Merle said, "Maybe—well, if there was a special team, trained to take over when a disaster call comes—?"

"That sounds like a good idea," Mrs. Mollison replied. "I will give it some thought."

They checked the narcotics cabinet, which still held considerably more than the ward's normal supply of drugs. The dispensing record started and continued for some time by Doro was reasonably accurate. There were only fractional shortages on several items.

Mrs. Mollison locked the cabinet. "The police feel we might find a better way to safeguard our drugs," she remarked. "And I must give that some thought also, but I am too tired to do it tonight . . . Miss Asquith, a message was relayed to me from Mrs. Hanes, who was trying to get here and help when her car broke down. Please stay on a little longer until she arrives."

Mrs. Mollison and the supervisor left. Not until they were

gone did Merle recall that her own name was not on the duty roster. As in Mike's case she could have stayed away. This had not occurred to Merle. She felt certain it had not occurred to Mike, either.

She sat down at the desk and began to check the count of the ward's patients as it stood at the moment. Only seconds later she became aware of someone standing beside the big door that opened on the ramp; she looked up and saw Ellen there, waiting.

It brought into sharp focus again her own problems and Sergeant Redding's suspicions—and Ellen's statement that she would tell everything about herself.

Merle said, "I will be with you in a moment."

She finished the ward count report and looked up again. Ellen was gone.

Merle leaped to her feet and hurried out to the ramp. For Ellen to change her mind now, to disappear again—no, this must not happen.

She had no glimpse of the woman. An ambulance was rolling out of the drive, leaving it clear. And Merle saw a man running down the drive, turning from it onto the sidewalk at the street, disappearing around a high concrete abutment there which extended southward to wide steps at the hospital's High Street entrance.

She ran also, down the drive and onto the walk.

Illumination from the arc light at the parking lot revealed Ellen Carey standing with her back against the concrete. A man was facing her, the width of the sidewalk between them —Bruce Lockyer.

Merle paused for an instant, feeling the beat of the persistent rain. They did not seem to be aware of her.

Lockyer's hands lifted, fingers writhing. His voice was furry, half-strangled by bitter emotion as he spoke, "More than five years of waiting . . . Do you remember me?"

"Yes," she replied, sounding spent, defeated, broken. "You were Mary Lockyer's husband."

"I remember you, too—Joyce Condon! And you killed her!" Lockyer cried.

He lunged at the woman, hands reaching out to grip and tear.

Running again, Merle thrust herself between them.

XIV

Merle took the impact of Lockyer's rush and felt his hand graze her cheek, with the stinging rake of a fingernail. But he had not meant to strike her. The man stumbled back from Merle. He stood with shoulders hunched a little, head thrust forward, fingers twitching again—but not in a show of fury, for all of the angry emotion seemed to be abruptly drained out of him.

"You aren't going to do anything more," Merle told him.

Lockyer breathed hard, gaspingly, as though that run down the drive in pursuit of Ellen Carey had left him completely spent. His lips moved, but no sound came from them.

Ellen said, "Merle, I saw him a moment ago and started to run, but I won't do any more of that. I promised that I would tell you all about myself. I'll keep my promise—"

She sounded very tired also, and there was an obvious dreariness of spirit in the woman which made Lockyer blink. This was something, it seemed, quite different from what he had anticipated.

Merle shifted position, backing up a little so she could have Ellen Carey in front of her, could see her pallid, waxen features. The woman said, "You must have guessed I was once a nurse—?"

"Mike Jablonski guessed that," Merle replied.

"He was right," Ellen said. "And Bruce Lockyer is also right. I am Joyce Condon."

Lockyer made a sobbing sound. He did not move, though.

Somebody came along hurriedly from the direction of the drive, and stopped. Merle discovered it was Mike. Sergeant Redding was with him. They stood together, looking on. Redding showed a tired frown as he studied the trio here.

Mike said gently, "Ellen, I had a glimpse of you, several minutes ago, and I called Sergeant Redding. He was at the train wreck; he came quickly. I had to call him. I hope you understand—?"

It was as though Ellen had not heard his words. She broke in on him, speaking again to Merle, "I did a bad thing, nearly six years ago. I helped a doctor perform three abortions. One of the patients—died."

Lockyer sobbed again. Merle remembered starkly her premonition about Ellen on the night of Jane Doe's operation.

Lockyer's wife had died, Ellen's doing. Lockyer had not been able to accept that loss.

"The doctor and I were tried for manslaughter, and were sent to prison," Ellen went on, dreariness deepening in her as she confided this. "Poor darling, he couldn't take the shame and disgrace; he cut his wrists, very soon—"

There was a dark shading of agony in her voice for a moment. It was wholly obvious Ellen had loved him, very deeply.

"I served my term, nearly five years," she said. "I was released."

"It wasn't enough punishment," Lockyer said thickly. "Not nearly enough!"

Redding moved suddenly, to stand beside the man.

"I know," Ellen agreed. "I thought those five years in prison would pay for what I did, but I was wrong. I know now that no payment can ever be enough. The terrible memories are still with me. They will always be with me, not only what we did to your wife, which was so wrong, but also of what followed, when we tried to save her, and failed. We—we were not wicked people; we did try, desperately, to keep her from dying, but septicemia began, and spread so fast . . . I can't forget that we failed. I hope you will manage to find some easing of what you remember, in time. I don't think I can, not ever."

Lockyer blinked again. It seemed apparent to Merle this was something he had not anticipated, either. Perhaps he had thought she would be defiant, not caring for the tragedy inflicted on him. To see her ravaged features and gray-streaked hair, to hear her voice, holding the horrors of which she was speaking, appeared to put him in a state of dazed confusion.

Sergeant Redding growled, to Ellen, "We have the full record of what you are talking about, of the trial and what followed. All of it arrived from New York only today, when we learned for the first time Lockyer was involved in the case which sent you to prison. And the doctor of whom you're speaking performed more than the three abortions you've mentioned. All of them were performed for high fees."

"Yes," Ellen admitted. "He was desperate. He had a wife who refused to give him a divorce and who was ruining him with her extravagances. He had to have money, a great deal of money, and he knew only one way to get it. I took part in only those—three. I found out what he was doing, and insisted that he let me help him."

All of it seemed so bleakly clear, now. Because of overwhelming love for a man, Ellen—Merle still thought of her by that name, and not as Joyce Condon—had risked every-

thing, knowing the consequences if what she was doing were to be discovered; every nurse would be well aware of the price she must pay if apprehended while helping an abortionist.

Then something had gone tragically wrong. Bruce Lockyer's wife had died, and the price had become crushingly greater. Ellen had been required to pay it—prison, the complete ruin of her life, and the shattering loss of the man she had loved.

Merle had a feeling something even more had been required of Ellen as expiation of her guilt. She had been a nurse, a very good nurse, Mike had guessed, and it seemed probable his guess was right. But, with a criminal record, Ellen could be a nurse no longer. This, Merle thought, had been an additional heavy burden she must bear.

And Ellen confirmed her thought, "When I served my sentence and was released, I wanted more than anything else to work in a hospital again—not as a nurse, I felt it was impossible to hope for that, in this country, but in some position where I could help patients. I had missed such work, greatly. They hadn't let me do it while I was behind bars, not in a woman's prison, with my record—"

Sergeant Redding said, "So you traveled as far as you could from where you had served your sentence, and then hunted around until you learned of someone with a nurse's aide's experience whose name you could use—?"

Ellen replied, "I found a job as dishwasher in a hospital kitchen, since they didn't do any particular checking of applicants for that type of work. I hoped to transfer to a position as nurse's aide, but somebody looked at me one day and said my face seemed familiar. There were many pictures of me at the time of the trial, and I suppose they were widely published . . ."

Mike grunted at this, and Merle knew what he was thinking. Mike had seen Ellen's picture at the time of the trial, probably, and it had stuck in his memory. And he must not have gone back far enough in his search of the newspaper files.

"I felt I must leave, before someone did remember who I was," Ellen went on. "Then I heard of an aide who had quit her job; no one seemed to know why. I went to see the woman, gained her confidence and persuaded her to talk, about the hospitals where she had worked and her reason for quitting, that she was going to marry a former patient and move to Australia with him. She had kept this to herself, since he was in his sixties and she was afraid people would poke fun at her."

"The real Ellen Carey—?" Sergeant Redding asked.

"Yes. So I decided to take a chance and use her name—at a large hospital, in a large city," Ellen said.

The rain had let up. It was very quiet on the street. Merle

noticed that Redding, who had held Lockyer's arm for several moments, was holding it no longer. Lockyer seemed to be as absorbed as were the rest of them in what the woman was revealing.

Redding said, "The fingerprints in your file here at City General don't belong to Joyce Condon; we have checked them against your real prints. Whose prints were used—and how?"

Ellen hesitated. It seemed for a moment there would be no reply to the policeman's question. But then she shrugged, as though to say it no longer mattered. "When I found out fingerprints were required, it seemed I might as well give up," she said. "But I took another chance. I managed to put off having my prints recorded, or even going to the room where it is done, so there would be no danger of anyone there realizing anything was wrong. I found a woman on the street and offered her ten dollars. Her prints were recorded in the name of Ellen Carey. I waited in front of the hospital and paid when she came out and showed me the ink on her finger-tips."

Those prints, Merle recalled, had been checked only against the local police records. Ellen had landed the humble, obscure lowpay job that she wanted—in a hospital, working again with patients.

The woman was looking to Merle, now. "I knew it was dangerous, for me to do the things I did recently which might arouse suspicion, might make you begin to suspect I knew more than an aide should," she said. "But I couldn't seem to help myself. You had to function as head nurse, with Mrs. Boswell ill—and you handled yourself very well, but there were rough moments when you needed help, and I simply couldn't hold back; I liked you so much—"

"Oh, Ellen!" Merle whispered, feeling tears sting her eyes.

Ellen's gaze shifted to Mike Jablonski. "I had to help you too, for—for the same reason," she told him. "I had done some work with catatonics, when I was a nurse. Was my guess about Jane Doe confirmed—?"

Mike bit his lip. He looked away from her; perhaps there were tears in his eyes also. Then he nodded jerkily, yes.

"Ellen, your locket was found. I have it," Merle said.

"I am glad," the woman said. "You know now whose picture is in it."

Yes. The picture of her dead lover, for whom she had risked—and lost—everything.

Ellen went on, "I didn't notice it had been lost until just before you called me at my rooming house. I had been at the Nursing Station the night before, when you saw me, for a different reason—the talk about . . . Lockyer. I recognized

his name at once, of course; I asked myself why he had gone there, on the night when he assaulted those two men. To find me—? I supposed that was the reason. And had he learned anything that might lead him to me? I kept asking myself that, until at last I had to go and try to find out, picking a time when Jonesy was not in the room—"

She looked to Bruce Lockyer. "Did you notice the card file on the desk which listed the names of all Ward 100 workers?" Ellen asked.

"Yes," he muttered, sounding very tired. "But I had a chance to look at only a few of those cards. I didn't find anything which gave me a lead to you, what name you were using."

Ellen said, "I was afraid you might have made a list of all the women workers, and their addresses, that you might check up on them, one by one. I ran from the Nursing Station that night. I had a feeling there were suspicions about me, and feared being found there so late might add to them. Then I called you the next morning, Merle. I was worried about you, about the ward. I learned you had seen me when I ran, and I heard something in your voice that told me you were beginning to guess I was not what I seemed to be. That next night I left the place where I was living. I meant to disappear."

But a radio flash about the disaster had brought her back—forced to return, it seemed, by a sense of being needed which she could not deny, and with the resolve to reveal who she really was, the object of Bruce Lockyer's bitter search.

There could have been so complicity between Ellen and Lockyer; this must be wholly obvious now to Sergeant Redding.

But—perhaps Ellen had not told the whole truth; perhaps she had acted with someone else in all that had happened here.

This suggestion brought Merle up short, joltingly.

Ellen had been a nurse; she knew drugs. A woman in a uniform, she could have gone anywhere in City General, virtually unnoticed. And she had served a sentence in prison, where she might have made contacts for the sale of stolen narcotics.

Doro had been savagely beaten, had testified a woman had done that to her. Merle remembered her own reluctant suspicion of Ellen then, the possibility Ellen had been the assailant, hoping to seize the Ward 100 narcotics key from Doro for swift, daring use.

Could there have been, hidden somewhere behind Ellen's ravaged features, a bitter desire to strike back at a world which she might be thinking had badly misused her? Would a revelation of this now be forthcoming?

But Ellen said nothing more. Light glittered faintly on the wet street. A hard wind was beginning to blow. Ellen was looking down at the walk. Lockyer was studying her, an expression of utmost weariness in his features. And Redding was studying both of them, brow heavily ridged.

Merle recalled that she had been away from Ward 100 for several minutes, and should be getting back. Mike stirred and took a backward step, but paused.

Redding said, "You two are under arrest. Lockyer, you know the charge against you, assault. As for you, Miss—Condon—"

Ellen started. "I have done nothing wrong here at City General, nothing!" she cried. "Please believe me—!"

"The charge against you, for the present, is a substitution of fingerprints for the possible purpose of committing a felony," Redding told her.

He hesitated then, looking to Merle, who told him of the status at the ward. "I must transfer it to Mrs. Hanes; she may be waiting for me now," Merle said.

"All right. Do that," Redding decided. "Then wait there. I will want you downtown for questioning; someone will be along soon to pick you up."

She was still under suspicion, then. For Redding, the answers about the narcotics thefts were still to be found.

Merle said, "Ellen, I'll—see you get your locket."

The woman gave her a tired, grateful look. Ellen began to move away at a slow pace, in obedience to Redding's pull on her arm. He also had hold of Lockyer, who glanced back momentarily to Merle. "Miss Asquith, thanks for all you have done, for advising me on that first night to give myself up," he said.

They headed across the street toward the parking lot.

Merle watched them for a moment longer. Then she turned to where Mike had been standing, and found he was gone.

Sometime during the preceding moments Mike had slipped silently away. Merle found she was standing alone.

She hurried to the ambulance drive and saw it was deserted, as was the ramp. The Nursing Station was empty; Cece Hanes apparently had not yet reported.

And Mike was not in sight. He had left, she thought despairingly, wanting to put an end to something which had become unbearable for him. Perhaps he was gone now from City General for good, to begin the effort of finding a residency somewhere else, and perhaps what Dr. Cohill had suggested was true, that having been rejected here would mean a strike against him wherever he applied.

A police car came down High Street, turned in at the

parking lot, then backed into the street, turned and was gone up it again, accelerating swiftly, bearing Redding, Ellen and Lockyer away.

Merle took a few steps along the walk, and a few more. The wind hammered at her. A glance through the iron picket fence on her left showed the Nursing Station was still empty. Cece Hanes still had not appeared for Merle to relinquish the ward and wait until Redding's man came for her.

Perhaps relinquishing the ward would be her last act at City General. Even if everything was cleared up, Merle did not see how she could continue here. All of her memories would now be far too painful to endure.

Merle walked on a little farther, and found that now she could not see the Nursing Station. She started to wheel about, to start back, but stopped, with a sudden inexplicable sensation as though icy water was beginning to trickle down her back, drop by drop.

A number of cars were parked along the High Street curb. Merle was looking at one of them, a long, low, expensive car with a square, chrome-plated radiator grille.

She had seen that care before. Where? When? Merle could not quite remember. But the icy sensation persisted as a whisper somewhere deep within her cried a frantic warning.

There was no one in the car. She heard a low, throaty growl, barely audible above the roar of the wind; its motor was running. Also, its front wheels were turned outward from the curb. It seemed that whoever had left the car here meant to rush away in a hurry—soon. It could not have been deserted for more than several moments. No one would leave such a car untended, its motor running, for very long.

Merle stood for a moment, thinking of what might be happening now, the Nursing Station empty as it had been when the trap had been set, with someone who might have gone over the picket fence to make an approach along the terrace, working toward the narcotics cabinet at Ward 100.

She turned and began to run, on legs which felt like brittle sticks.

She ran on tiptoe up the drive and onto the ramp. It was still deserted. Merle cautiously approached the Nursing Station, for a look inside. The big room was empty. Her hands clenched tightly. Had her guesses been wrong? No, she told herself. She was beginning to remember where she had seen the car before, was beginning, with terrifying clarity, to realize that she had nearly all of the answers to everything that had happened.

But a long dragging moment passed, and another, with

nothing happening. Had the thief, hearing her approach, shied away? She began to fear this was probable.

Then all of the lights at the ambulance court and in the Nursing Station abruptly winked out.

A split second later, standing in darkness, Merle sensed someone coming with a silent rush from the men's side, crossing the room before her. Moving again on tiptoe, she stepped into the room.

Now, out of the wind, Merle heard a metallic click and rattle, a thud, then a faint squeak as a cabinet door was pulled open. Next, she heard faint scraping sounds. The cabinet was being hurriedly emptied.

Merle tiptoed toward those sounds, telling herself she must stop this intruder, somehow—and she felt chilling dread of who it might be.

All of the lights blazed on again.

A man whirled about, at the open narcotics cabinet. He was someone Merle had never seen before, a big man, coarsely handsome, the pockets of his coat bulging with what he had stuffed into them. Lips skinned back from his teeth in a furious grimace as he saw Merle. He rushed at her, instantly; it was clear his intent was to get through the open ramp door and run down the drive.

Merle tried to stand her ground, tried to grab at him and hold on. But she was battered by the swing of an arm which hurled her sideways, against a wall. She slipped down to one knee. She had impeded the man for only a second. He ran at the door again.

A fractional instant later Merle, half-dazed, saw Mike Jablonski rush past her and hit the man hard, from the side. She heard the *splat-splat!* of Mike's fists slugging him.

A convulsive blow from the thief sent Mike staggering back. He almost fell. And Merle screamed, a cry of utmost terror that was wrenched from deep within her—a cry of fear for Mike, not for herself. She saw metal glint brightly, saw the thief had a gun in his hand now, and it was pointing at Mike.

The gun roared harshly, and Merle screamed again as Mike staggered and went sideways, falling toward the floor.

XV

For the barest of instants Merle closed her eyes, with a sense that life had dealt her its ultimate blow. Then she forced them open again, forced herself to stand; she must go to Mike —But she discovered there was no need to do this.

Mike had not been hit by the bullet, had not even been touched. He had gone sideways, dodging; now, in a crouch, he leaped at the other man, driving in low, moving more quickly than Merle would have believed anyone could move. He hit the man in a driving tackle, arms wrapped about his legs, and slammed him to the floor, with such force that the gun, jolted from the other's grip, skidded away.

Merle, with a feeling that terror had torn everything loose within her, went to the gun at a wobbling pace, bent and picked it up.

Mike, who had the thief pinned to the floor, was slugging again, fists rising and falling. Mike's face was distorted by wild anger. The other man was crying out. He stopped trying to fight, to escape; his hands covered his face as he attempted to protect it. His frantic, pleading cries continued—until Sergeant Redding, rushing in, grabbed at Mike. "My God, don't kill him!" Redding shouted.

Merle leaned against the desk, still feeling all broken and twisted inside. She saw Mike rise and stand, grasping for breath. She heard him mutter, "I'm sorry—went a little crazy, I guess. He . . . struck Merle—"

Redding said, "I was two blocks away when it suddenly hit me, this place standing empty when I last saw it, and she was returning here. I had a hunch that scared me cold; I came back as fast as the car I was in could travel . . . You had the same hunch—?"

"Yes," Mike replied. "More drugs than usual in that cabinet tonight; it seemed an opportunity that probably would be grabbed. I made a mistake, though, cut around to the terrace and checked that, then had to come in after him, had to grope for the switches and turn the lights on again."

Redding looked to the man who lay on his back, quivering, hands still covering his face. "Now, who do you suppose this is, and how does he fit in with all that happened—?" Redding asked.

Others were appearing—Dr. Cohill, round-eyed, and a night

aide, then Cece Hanes, reporting at last. And someone else was also appearing, from the women's side, moving in an unsteady, faltering manner, features chalky, to speak despairingly, "I knew it would end—like this. I tried to tell him. He wouldn't listen. I told him I was through when he made me come to him, that night across the street. He—beat me—"

Then Doro Speare began to crumple, began to weep in abject, hopeless misery. Merle went quickly to her. She put her arms about Doro and held the woman gently as Doro continued to weep, another one who, like Ellen Carey, had risked too much for the sake of a man and who had lost.

On the following afternoon, checking off duty, Merle found Mike Jablonski waiting for her at the clock. "Can I talk to you?" he asked with a strained, stiff sort of formality.

Her heart leaped painfully. "Of course!"

She had worried about him all day. Much more had happened last night, with no chance to talk then. She had been up until three, had slept very little, then had worked today's shift on the ward. The Nursing Office had notified her she was on the duty roster again. Merle had learned she had been removed from it only at Sergeant Redding's request, so that she might be available for the questioning which had been delayed and which was now not necessary.

She was a head nurse no longer. Mrs. Boswell had returned this morning, a calm, pleasant, very competent woman. Merle had been glad to return the ward to her direction.

And she had worried about Mike, fearing he was gone for good, that she could not find him, to pour out all that was in her heart.

His right arm was in a sling, since he had suffered a sprained wrist in last night's wild fight. Additionally, his face was bruised and he had two broken knuckles on his right hand.

Merle said, "You might have broken your hand!" She had worried about this all day, too, that the surgeons' skill of that hand might be impaired. And she added anxiously, "Mike, will it be all right?"

"Sure," he replied. "Don't fret about me. I feel fine."

So did she. In spite of lack of sleep, of a hard day's work, Merle felt better than she had in many months. There was no headache, today, no sense of feverishness or of being pushed toward a breaking point, only worry about him.

He took her arm with his left hand. They walked out to the terrace, which held so many memories now for Merle, of her demand that he never touch her again, and later of his kisses.

Was Mike remembering, also? She felt his hand quiver, felt tightness in him. Had he returned today only to say good-bye? Merle shied violently from this possibility. As she moved slowly along the terrace she started to talk—not of themselves, for she feared to broach this subject, not yet, but of all that had happened, and of its aftermath.

She spoke first of Doro, who had met a man to take her breath away, the narcotics thief—someone, it had developed, who had been a hospital orderly once and who had some familiarity with City General.

He had wheedled Doro into helping him. She had supplied wax impressions of keys to narcotics cabinets on upper floors where she had worked as relief head nurse; he had later raided them. Then, becoming terrified by what she was doing, she had tried to free herself from him, turning to Carl Hardin—but had yielded to pressure in the phone call that she had pretended to Jonesy was an inquiry about a patient, and had also hastily made an impression of the Ward 100 key, taking this to where he was waiting and watching, at the parking lot.

There, Doro had nerved herself to tell the man she was through with him. He had beaten her. A signet ring had slashed her face.

Fear had kept Doro silent about that. She had hastily improvised the lie about Jonesy, had told the later lie that a woman had assaulted her. She had desperately hoped for a way out through Carl Hardin. Merle felt certain Doro had quickly come to care genuinely for him. And Merle, remembering belatedly last night where she had seen the expensive car before, Doro getting out of it at the time when Mike had first kissed her, had been terribly afraid, standing in darkness and listening to Ward 100's narcotics cabinet being opened, that it might possibly be Carl Hardin who was the thief.

But it had been the other man. Jonesy had balked his first try, when he had managed to get in along the terrace and through the men's side, escaping the same way. Then, as Mike had felt he would, he had made a second attempt last night after having watched the Nursing Station again, after having guessed rightly there would be a large supply of drugs on hand to be taken, because of the train wreck.

"Poor Doro," Merle said to Mike now. "She must have been frantic with fear, must have hated herself because of what she had done. I think she was trying to make up for that, reporting last night and working as long as she could. I—I'm going to stand by her."

"So am I," Mike replied.

There was hope for Doro Speare. Carl Hardin was standing

by her, also. He intended to marry Doro, as soon as possible.

Sergeant Redding had appeared at Ward 100 this afternoon, revealing to Merle she had been trailed two days ago, and the time she had spent at the lonely hillside park, as though waiting for someone, had added to his suspicions. Smiling, he had said today, "I took an awfully big chance where you were concerned—should have arrested you, the strange things you were doing. But, a girl as nice and young as you, so devoted to your work, I kept telling myself there just had to be some other answer."

Merle had blushed at his characterization of her. Perhaps it was partly true, she thought. A very young girl had fallen in love with Phil Crown. That girl, not much older nor much wiser, had still been in Merle last night. Then she had abruptly vanished, forever.

How could she tell Mike this, and make him believe it? Merle, walking beside him, sought for words to tell what had happened last night, changing everything in an instant, setting the course her life must follow from now on.

Sergeant Redding had gone on talking, "A strange, tangled sort of case. We came to have some suspicion of Doro Speare, but only as one of the relief head nurses, any one of whom might have supplied wax impressions of keys, but we weren't even sure that was being done, since some of the cabinets were being broken open instead of being unlocked, misleading us, which was what the thief intended. We were misled also by Miss Speare's beating, her statement that a woman did it, and by Mrs. Jones' unfortunate blundering—"

Jonesy had, of course, been entirely cleared. She was back on duty again.

"In addition," Sergeant Redding had said, "there was the puzzle of Bruce Lockyer and Ellen Carey to muddle things even more—and your meetings with Lockyer, which he has explained to our satisfaction."

Then Redding had added that the hospital would press no charge against Ellen, and neither would the police. She had told Redding that she was thinking of leaving the country, upon being released, hoping to find a place where she might work as a nurse again—and as Joyce Condon, her past known, accepted, because she would be needed.

Merle had gone to her room last night for the locket, had returned to place it in Ellen's hand. The look on the woman's face then had almost made Merle weep. "She still loves her doctor," Merle said now to Mike. "Do you suppose he was really driven to the things he did, with no other way out for him—?"

"Who can say?" Mike responded. "Maybe, poor devil, he

was only weak. Unfortunately, they don't pass out halos along with licenses to practice medicine."

They didn't hand out halos with nursing pins, either, Merle told herself, thinking of Doro Speare—and of Merle Asquith, and her own weakness where Phil Crown had been concerned.

Redding had spoken also of Bruce Lockyer, who would probably have to spend some time in jail; after that, he was hopeful of making a fresh start in life.

"He has a cousin here in the city who will help him," Redding had revealed. "It was the cousin who, pressured and reluctantly checking around among local hospitals, got word to him that someone was here who might be Joyce Condon. That hunt for her was an ugly, dark business. Lockyer is greatly relieved now—and grateful to you—that you stopped him when he finally faced the woman, and that it simply wasn't in him then to do anything to her."

What he had discovered, Merle thought, was that the woman had suffered as much as he had, or more, tortured by memories of the life with which she and her doctor had gambled, to lose it.

And perhaps her anguish had been heightened by another circumstance, an additional burden which Lockyer had been forced to bear. Mike spoke of this, as they walked slowly on. "There was one thing Lockyer didn't say, but I guessed it was probably true, and Redding confirmed to me that it appears in the record of the trial. The child that was lost, along with the wife, was Lockyer's own; his wife hadn't concealed her pregnancy. But she was young and frightened, her mother had died, bearing her, and she could not be convinced that she was quite healthy, with her prospects of normal birth very good. She had some money of her own; she found her way to that doctor—"

His child lost, also—this had added a cruel spur to Lockyer's anguish. But the years had brought an easing of that, at last. Perhaps in time Ellen would find peace as well.

Life and death were so strangely entangled, Merle thought. Hope flowered from the deepest bitterness. There had been last night's disaster, bringing pain and desolation to so many, yet at the same time it had set in motion the events which had pointed the way to solution of all of her own problems.

Or—had it? She and Mike had come to where the terrace ended. They stopped. And now, Merle knew, what was uppermost in her thoughts, hammering there, must be spoken of at last.

But how to begin, what to say—? All this day she had gone over words in her mind, again and again, trying to pick the right ones; however, what came out now, spoken with an

abruptness she had not planned, was, "Mike, I am leaving City General."

This would mean sacrifice. She could have a very good future here. Also, Mrs. Mollison had today asked her to sit on a committee which would draw up a new disaster plan and study better ways to safeguard narcotics and to check applicants for hospital jobs.

She saw Mike flinch. Merle realized instantly what he must be thinking her words meant. She cried, "I am not going to Phil Crown! That is over and finished—forever—!"

This was true beyond any doubt. In one instant last night she had been freed of Phil Crown's spell.

He had called her, only an hour or so ago. After a day of silence on her part, Phil had grown impatient; on the phone he had begun at once the beguiling talk which was so familiar, but with a hard edge in his voice. Phil had not meant to be denied.

Merle had said quietly, "No. And don't ever call me again. This is good-bye."

She had hung up with a feeling of serenity, of certainty. She could forget him now. All desire for the man was gone. It would never return.

Merle knew the exact second when this had happened.

Ellen Carey and Doro Speare, those two sad women who had found disaster as a result of involvement with the wrong men, had had nothing to do with it. No, the moment which had excised Phil Crown from Merle Asquith's life had occurred when she had heard a gun roar and had seen Mike Jablonski seem to stagger, as though hit. That moment, and the terror for him which had made Merle feel everything in her had been broken into bits and pieces, had told that her heart was in Mike Jablonski's keeping, and always would be.

She tried to tell him this, but her voice faltered. Mike's features seemed blank. He did not believe her, Merle feared in momentary despair. Perhaps he was telling himself she was speaking only in pity, attempting to ease the position in which he found himself, still a reject of City General with his future murky and wholly uncertain.

Then Merle remembered the last thing Sergeant Redding had said to her today, "When you saw that car standing at the curb, its motor running, why did you go back to the ward on your own instead of reaching inside to turn the key, take it out and then get away from there, while yelling your head off to bring help?"

He had shaken his head, laughing, answering his own question as he concluded, "You did it because of what you are, I suppose—that, as I said before, you do things impulsively.

Well, fortunately, it seems most of the time it turns out to be the right thing!"

Why hadn't she spoken impulsively to Mike at once, telling him plainly what she meant to do? But it was not too late. Merle said, "I am leaving City General to be with you, Mike. Wherever you are, from now on, I am going to be there, too."

Perhaps these words, at last, seeming to ring like anvil strokes between them, were the right ones. Mike relaxed a little, with a startled, wondering expression. "You would do that, not knowing where I might go, what I might do—?"

Merle put her right hand in his left hand and clasped it tightly. This was her reply.

Mike looked away from her, a muscle quivering in his cheek, and went on, "I had to come back here today, feeling it would be the last time I would ever see you. I meant to say . . . good-bye, and also to apologize for what I thought about you and Lockyer."

"Mike, we are never going to say good-bye, and you needn't apologize. You were under such terrible strain, you must have thought I was heartless, not even saying I was sorry your application had been turned down, but I didn't know about that until yesterday morning. And you are still going to be a wonderful surgeon and I am going to be with you, no matter where you are!"

He looked to her again, and her heart leaped at a glint in his eyes, a resurgence of his vigor and forcefulness. "I hope I never forget for a moment, the rest of my life, that you said those words, Merle," he responded. "Now I can tell you something. I am not going to be leaving City General."

Breath caught in Merle's throat. She gasped, "Mike, they've changed their minds—? They're giving you a residency?"

Mike shook his head, no. He said, "A while ago I was offered a job here, through Dr. Voss, a rough sort of job but the only one that is available. It is in outside medical relief, looking after patients in slum homes, a mountain of work to handle and most of it sheer drudgery. I must be on call day and night. I will be classified as a second year intern, at intern's pay. And if I can stick it out for a year, I will be allowed to apply again for a City General residency."

A rough job, a mountain of work; nothing had ever come easy for him. He had wanted a chance for more work, more learning, and it had been offered to Mike Jablonski, plus a chance also for the destiny awaiting him on the nineteenth floor, more patients like Jane Doe, many more.

Stick it out—? With her help, Merle vowed to herself, he could and would.

He said, "I told Voss maybe I would accept. Then I went

to look for you, to ask if there was any hope for—us. I have been trying to find a way to ask, ever since we met by the clock."

"Well, you have your answer, so tell him yes! Mike, I'll keep my job, of course. We'll rent an apartment near here. My car is just across the street. Let's start looking for an apartment right now!"

Dreams of delight were flooding her thoughts. Not all of what lay ahead of them would be grinding drudgery.

Mike laughed, in great pleasure and excitement. "Okay!" he said. "Also, we have a lot of things to talk about. Our families, for instance; I have half a dozen brothers and sisters, nice but hard-headed like me, and a little clannish. They may take some getting used to—"

"I have a brother who is constantly wanting to borrow money. Maybe you think he won't take getting used to!" Merle said.

They laughed together. He put his arm about her and kissed her. Then they started toward the parking lot. Mike said with hard-jawed determination, "Next time around, I'm going to be the very best. I'll land that residency!"

Merle, tightly clasping his hand again, had no doubt of this at all.

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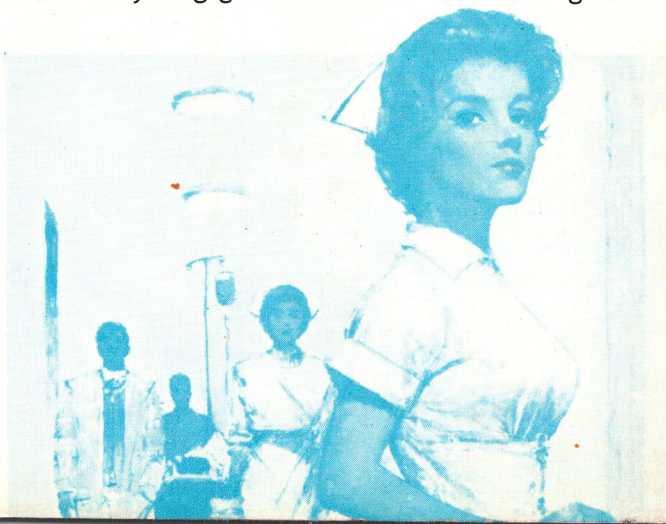

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